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The Mytho-Historical Mode:
Metafictional Parody and Postmodern High Irony in the Works of Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, and Ishmael Reed

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For Nobue, the completion

For Emilia, the argumentation

For Nicholas, the intensity of play

Abstract

Beginning with an analysis of Northrop Frye's concept of modal progression (i.e., the cycle from myth to irony—and back again) and an application of modal theory to an analysis of postmodern narrative forms, the need to revise Frye's concept of modal progression becomes apparent. Rather than following the cyclical pattern Frye proposes, the course of modal progression appears to be fixed to an axis of experience: a certain normative threshold which describes the narrator's and/or the narrative protagonist's power of action relative to an assumed neutral audience. How the narrative depiction of the narrator and/or the fictional protagonist relates to this threshold determines the characteristics of the literary mode. As argued in this dissertation, the increase in the hero's power of action (typical of late modern and postmodern literature) does not necessarily indicate an abrupt return to the mythic mode (as predicted by Frye). Instead, what is seen to emerge is a decidedly advanced species of narrative irony, or, "high irony" that, while maintaining its distinctly ironic qualities, displays a remarkable tendency to disassemble/reassemble precedent narrative forms (e.g., myth, nonfiction, realistic fiction) into a self-reflexive, highly metafictional form of parody. As the absurd, parodic chaos of the high ironic mode shares several significant traits with both myth and nonfiction, these overlapping, parodic relationships are of great literary importance and theoretical interest. These modal connections and disconnections are what this dissertation attempts to explore and clarify. To that end, this dissertation charts the various ways that myth and nonfictional forms have been put to parodic use in the high ironic metafictions of Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover and Ishmael Reed, three writers whose seminal mid-20th century works did much to shape and direct the course of contemporary American literature. Of special emphasis in this study is the American postmodern preoccupation with revision and the politics of literary subversion that attends this revisionary impulse. The final hypothesis reached by this dissertation is that the literary repercussions of these mid-20th century excursions into ironic, metafictional abstraction have not led to a return to myth, but rather to a discernable tendency among 21st century American writers to return to previously eschewed forms of non-ironic narrative. This trajectory thus marks a movement away from forms of narrative irony (as well as away from the mode of myth) and an emerging tendency towards more referential, less fantastic forms of narrative fiction.

Declaration of Originality

I, Michael Heitkemper-Yates, declare that this thesis has been composed by me. It is my own work and it has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification. Any information derived from the work of others has been acknowledged in the text.

Signed,

Michael Heitkemper-Yates

Michael Heitkemper-Yates
The University of Edinburgh
2 September 2013

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List of Abbreviations

CL. Barthelme, Donald. *City Life*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1971.

TTDB. ---. *The Teachings of Don B.: Satire, Parodies, Fables, Illustrated Stories, and Plays of Donald Barthelme*. Ed. Kim Herzinger. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 1992.

UPUA. ---. *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts.* New York: Bantam, 1969.

PD. Coover, Robert. *Pricksongs & Descants.* London: Penguin, 1969.

INTRODUCTION

TEXT / INTERTEXT / CONTEXT: IRONIC NARRATIVE AND ITS MODE

> Language, after all, still remains the deepest habit of our mind, our most thorough inheritance from dead or vanished gods.
>
> --- Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*, 1971

Locating the Postmodern

The research in mid-twentieth century, postmodern American poetics described in this dissertation concerns an analysis of narrative irony as it is employed by a group of highly influential American writers whose most innovative explorations of this mode of literature were published between the mid-1960s and the early 1970s. Following in the postmodern aftermath of the violence visited upon the mimetic referentiality and the direct, narratorial authority of the conventional form of the novel by early twentieth century writers such as James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner, mid-twentieth century writers such as Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, and Ishmael Reed—among a host of other contemporaneous American authors, including Thomas Pynchon, William H. Gass, John Barth, Stanley Elkin, Clarence Major, William Gaddis, Joyce Carol Oates, Richard Brautigan, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.—found themselves the heirs to a tradition of literature that had moved the literary from a discourse on subjects to a discourse of objects.

The novel-as-world forms, exercises in parallax, and the dizzying labyrinths of time, place, and perspective previously investigated by the modernist writers of

the early twentieth century, were, in the postmodern period, extended to also include the reader, the narrator, and the text itself—metafictionally and self-reflexively—in the intertextual environment of narrative discourse. It is this metafictional world of self-reflexive, ironic narrative discourse that this dissertation anatomizes through an investigation of the early postmodern works of Coover, Barthelme, and Reed.

Outline of Dissertation Methodology and Significance

With the objective of conducting an in-depth critical analysis of the mode of narrative irony as it is deployed by these three American authors, this dissertation applies a synthetic approach to the study of narrative irony involving the modal theory proposed by Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism* and the method of literary history outlined by Hayden White in "The Problem of Change in Literary History," paying careful attention to what White defines as the "four prime elements of the literary field": the context, the audience, the artist, and the work (106). According to White's assessment, these four elements provide the "multivariant field" of relations that make up a literary history engaged with the language of literature as "an account both of change in continuity and of continuity in change" (105). As White indicates in his study of these processes, in order to avoid "the obscurantism of ontological speculation on the one side or the reductionism of scientistic distortion on the other," it is necessary to view the literary as an ever-shifting dialectic of the written and the spoken, the textual event and the speech act (106). As White explains:

> The dialectic of literary history, then, must be construed as the dialectic between literature (however defined) and language (however conceived). And any history of literature which does not place this dialectical relationship at the center of its problematic will necessarily

> be driven to false reductions on the one side or to false inflations on the other. For language is the medium that binds the work, the artist, and the audience together in a common mode of praxis which is at once the expression and the reflection of a shared experience of the world. ("The Problem of Change in Literary History" 106)

And it is toward a scholarly understading of (and personal curiosity regarding) the narratological significance of this language of "shared experience"—as well as its centrality in the formulation of the literary—that this dissertation directs its enquiry.

However, although Frye's theory of modes and White's theory of the relationship of literature and language are discussed in this dissertation and provide the methodology followed in this dissertation's subsequent analysis of the context, the audience, the artist, and the work of narrative irony (with special attention to the role each element plays in the development of the literature of the postmodern period), this dissertation is not primarily concerned with the forwarding of a new theory of literature or language as such. Neither is this dissertation in any way an attempt to narrow the mode of irony down to a mathematical network of metalinguistic equations.[1] Nor is this work an attempt to sketch out the intricacies of irony's development as a trope (as in D. C. Muecke's in *The Compass of Irony*, 1969), as a matrix of rhetorical maneuvers and figures of speech (as in Wayne C. Booth's in *A Rhetoric of Irony*, 1974), or as a form of critical self-consciousness (as in Gary J. Handwerk's *Irony and Ethics in Narrative*, 1985)—though all of these perspectives have certainly shaped the contours of the argument forwarded in this dissertation. Neither is the analysis in the following chapters an attempt to map out the incredible scope of the postmodern as an ideological paradigm, or, as a discrete philosophy of the contemporary moment; several interesting, highly articulate

[1] See Eggington, "Cervantes, Romantic Irony and the Making of Reality," 1048-49; Poggi, Cavicchio and Caldognetto, "Irony in a Judicial Debate," 217; Tittler, "Approximately Irony," 40-41.

approaches to the question of the postmodern are already available—a selection of which are discussed at some length in this dissertation.[2] Instead, this dissertation represents an attempt to critically engage with, synthesize, and extend the critical discourse surrounding the mode of narrative irony—especially as this discourse is advanced in Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), Hayden White's *Metahistory* (1973), Mas'ud Zavarzadeh's *The Mythopoeic Reality* (1974), Linda Hutcheon's *Narcissistic Narrative* (1984), and Patricia Waugh's *Metafiction* (1984).

Through a close reading of a selection of exemplary postmodern texts and an analysis of the parodic structure of narrative irony as explored in these texts, the characteristics of this mode of narrative are analyzed and compared to the characteristics of concurrent and precedent modes of narrative. This analytical mapping of the dominant mode of mid-twentieth century literature not only fills a significant gap in contemporary literary scholarship, it also clarifies several aspects of the linguistic, formal, and ideological relationships that are shared between modernist, postmodernist, and post-postmodernist forms of narrative discourse. Also of significance is this dissertation's synthesis of previous attempts to critically analyze the structure of metafiction (e.g., as forwarded in the works of Hutcheon, Waugh, and Zavarzadeh listed above). In addition, this dissertation's detailed assessments of the literary mechanics and the literary politics of parody, especially as they play out in the metafictional forms of the postmodern period, are absolutely

[2] The list of contemporary texts pertinent to the area of "postmodern theory" is extremely extensive and would be pointless to enumerate here. However, some of the key "postmodern theory" texts concerned with the concept, history, and/or genealogy of the postmodern that are cited in this dissertation include (chronologically): Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Explained to Children* (1992), Hans Bertens's *The Idea of the Postmodern* (1995), Andrew Gibson's *Towards a Postmodern Theory of Literature* (1995), and Simon Malpas's *The Postmodern* (2005).

essential to a thorough understanding of the "poetics of postmodernism" (to borrow from Hutcheon) and the transideological revisions of myth and history that occurred during the period.

Although previous, similar attempts to investigate the structure of metafiction have been made, for example, by Robert Scholes in *Fabulation and Metafiction* (1979), Christine Brooke-Rose in *A Rhetoric of the Unreal* (1981), and Larry McCaffery in *The Metafictional Muse* (1982)—each of which are acknowledged and/or confronted in the chapters that follow—these works do not adequately recognize the centrality of parody and other ironic narrative forms in the metafictional mechanism. Nor do these works sufficiently recognize the significance of the radical shifts in narratorial agency that typically attend the progression from one dominant literary mode to the next. It is this critical deficit that this dissertation seeks to address through its anatomy of the ironic mode of literature and its close, critical analyses of the parodic metafictions of Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, and Ishmael Reed.

Locating the Mode of Irony

With an eye to the matrix of literary and linguistic constructs surrounding and informing the context, the audience, the artist, and the work of narrative irony, the first chapter of this dissertation ("Chapter One: Myth, Metafiction, and the High Ironic Mode") sets out to position a selection of the early works of Coover, Barthelme, and Reed in terms of their narrative mode. As discussed in detail in chapter one, discussion of these works in terms of their narrative mode offers the critical advantage of opening them up to a range of narratological discourses not

available to a strictly rhetorical, semantic, or semiotic approach to narrative. This range is absolutely crucial to any thorough analysis of narrative irony because, as Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni very succinctly expresses in, "L'Ironie comme trope," "irony requires of its reader a triple competence: linguistic, rhetorical or generic, and ideological" (Qtd. in Hutcheon: *A Theory of Parody,* 94).[3] And in answer to the questions posed by each of these competencies, a balanced analysis of narrative irony requires a critical approach capable of describing each of these points of contact between the object of the text and the reader's shared experience with that textual object. Also, as described in detail in the initial chapters of this dissertation, analysis of narrative irony in terms of its relation to precedent modes of literature offers the advantage of allowing the critic to account for the "change in continuity and of continuity in change" specified by White as requisite to a thorough understanding of how a text negotiates the gap between what is written and what a text's words might actually mean at a specific time and place in history—a distinction that is important to consider when dealing with the dual-voiced, paradoxical mode of narrative irony.

The critical range afforded by modal analysis—when properly adjusted (as discussed in the following chapter)—also allows the critic of narrative irony to investigate the parodic and satirical forms of ironic narration and how they relate, narratologically, to the narrators and narratorial devices employed in concurrent and precedent modes of literature. This narratologically comparative, modal approach to the analysis of the linguistic, rhetorical, and ideological matrix of narrative irony is necessary due to the fact that, as Linda Hutcheon writes in *Irony's Edge* (quoting

[3] See Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms,* 94; Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni, "L'Ironie comme trope," 116.

White and extending Kerbrat-Orecchioni's tripartite system of ironic competencies), analysis of the dual-voiced structure of irony requires a critical appreciation of the "transideological" nature of the parodic relations inherent in ironic narrative (10).[4] For, in Hutcheon's definition of irony and its transideological discourse, irony occurs, or, "happens," in the space "between the said and the unsaid," in the void that both connects and separates ideas and ideologies (*Irony's Edge* 11). Hutcheon writes, "irony happens as a part of a communicative process . . . [and] comes into being in the relations between meanings, but also between people and utterances, and, sometimes, between intentions and interpretations" (*Irony's Edge* 11-13). Irony involves a language that transideologically evokes and revokes its own literality and, in literature, employs a network of semiotic, rhetorical, and narrative strategies that maneuver meaning from a direct transfer of (the author's) communicative intention and (the reader's) interpretive reception towards the problematic space *between* intention and reception, or, in other words, irony involves a movement towards the performative, dialectical space wherein meaning is created.[5]

Self-Reflexivity, Indeterminacy, and Parody

As maintained in this dissertation, the radical indeterminacy that develops in this dialectical space makes narrative irony a powerful weapon of critique. Indeed, the subversive application of narrative irony has long been a technique of literary rebellion and countercultural protest (a topic returned to in the concluding section of

[4] See White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe,* 38.
[5] Hutcheon writes: "From the point of view of the *interpreter*, irony is an interpretive and intentional move: it is the making or inferring of **meaning** in addition to and different from what is stated, together with an **attitude** towards both the said and the unsaid. The move is usually triggered (and then directed) by conflictual textual or contextual evidence or by markers which are socially agreed upon." See Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge,* 11.

this dissertation). From proto-modernist works of narrative irony such as Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Notes From Underground* (1864) to the late-modernist otherness of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), and from the game-changing parodies of cultural and social myth in Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and Woolf's *The Waves* (1931), respectively, to the antebellum annihilation in Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932) and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), irony and parody have long been the weapons of choice in the literary rebel's attack on the dangers located within and/or associated with certain linguistic, rhetorical, and ideological constructs. However, where the works of postmodern writers such as Coover, Barthelme, and Reed differ from their modernist predecessors, as this dissertation seeks to show, is in their exaggerated foregrounding of the linguistic, rhetorical, and ideological mechanisms of narrative itself. Through metafictional parody and deconstructive forms of narrative self-reflexivity, these writers incorporate the text's own interpretation of itself within the scope of the dual-voiced ironic process of meaning creation. This process complicates the reader's construction of a definite reading of events, creating a profound doubt as to the veracity of any stable system of interpretation.

This self-reflexive indeterminacy is often achieved, as Hutcheon writes in *A Theory of Parody*, through parodic and/or intertextual narrative structures and metafictional forms that allow the narrative to explore a wide area of ontological and epistemological constructs and to deploy a multivariant approach to the narratorial perspectives and narrative voices guiding the events of the text. As Hutcheon describes it, in contemporary metafiction:

> . . . parody is frequently joined to manipulative narrative voices, overtly addressing an inscribed reader, or covertly maneuvering the reader to a desired position from which intended meaning (recognition and then interpretation of parody, for example) can be

allowed to appear, as if in anamorphic form. (*A Theory of Parody* 86)

As this dissertation serves to demonstrate, investigation of the works of Coover, Barthelme, and Reed reveals that this "intended meaning" (as well as the "desired position" from which this meaning is derived) is often, itself, foregrounded as little more than another system of relations that must be negotiated and ultimately accepted, rejected, or ignored during the reader's interaction with the text. This can often be a disorienting experience for the reader, as the clues to the decoding of the irony are not always what they seem (i.e., because these clues are often self-reflexively aware of their status as clues to the decoding of the parodic mechanism of an ironic narrative). As is argued in this dissertation, ironic metafiction is not simply fiction about fiction, it is fiction about fiction that is also self-consciously critical of the fact of its own fictionality.

The highly parodic, metafictional structure of the mode of narrative irony most frequently employed in the works of Coover, Barthelme, and Reed—the mode of "high irony," as it is conceived in the first chapter—appeals to parody in part because the works of these writers are actively engaged in an antagonistic, highly revisionary form of critique. As described in the chapters that follow, the high ironic metafictional critiques of Coover, Barthelme, and Reed are aimed at playfully undermining the institutionalized myths and authorized histories that exist within linguistic, narrative, and other socio-cultural constructs. Through dual-voiced forms of metafictional parody and radical alterations to both the narrator's and the protagonist's narrative agency, the works of these writers reveal the politics and ideologies contained within myth and history. It is precisely this act of revelatory, critical revision that is scrutinized in this dissertation.

Outline of the Authors and Texts Considered

Following the first chapter's placement of the postmodern and its metafictional mode of critical revision, in "Chapter Two: From the Pseudo-Sacred to the Pseudo-Historical: A Typological Approach to the Analysis of Metafiction," the narrative structures involved in this metafictional process of critical revision are compared with the structural components of mythopoesis and low ironic narrative. Through a brief comparative analysis of the various mythical revisions and outright ironic overhauls that have been visited upon the traditional "Blackbeard" narrative pattern, other concurrent modes of the postmodern period (e.g., low irony and myth) are traced through contemporary versions of the tale as it is adapted by Angela Carter, Robert Coover, and Donald Barthelme. As argued in this chapter, the critical revisions of myth that occur in the high ironic mode are also frequently paired with a similar deconstructive approach to the narrative structures and ideological mechanisms of nonfictional narrative, historiographic discourse, and other epistemologically authoritative linguistic and rhetorical constructs. In playing these mythical and historiographical constructs against each other, high ironic metafiction seeks to dispel the fallacious prospect of some complete truth or comprehensive reality beyond the linguistic confines of narrative by shattering and re-shattering the very structures that bind meaning to its message.

Following on from the second chapter's analysis of metafiction as a critical intermediary between myth and history, the metaphorical structure of Coover's deconstructive "demythicization" is analyzed and discussed in "Chapter Three: Robert Coover: Metafictional Parody and Metaphorical Immersion in *Pricksongs &*

Descants." Focusing on Coover's attacks on literary myth in *Pricksongs and Descants* (1969), this chapter analyzes the dynamics of cultural and aesthetic precedent, the metaphorical transmission of ideological content, and the place of these metaphorical structures within the subversive politics of postmodern narrative. The various ways in which Coover re-appropriates these loaded metaphorical structures for his own transideological ends is then compared to similar political renderings in the works of Barthelme and Reed.

"Chapter Four: Donald Barthelme: Anecdote, Adventure & Performance in the Narrative Collage," extends the analysis of metaphor forwarded in the third chapter and centers on Barthelme's subversive deployments of collage narrative. Through an exploration of Barthelme's fracturing of form and his humourous uses of intertextual citation, this chapter investigates the narrative politics of collage through an analysis of a selection of illustrated stories from *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts* (1968), *City Life* (1970), and a critical reading of the collage structures and fragmented narrative components of Barthelme's *Snow White* (1967). This chapter focuses on the various ways that Barthelme deconstructs myth and history through the use of multiple narrators, radical changes in syntax, and his self-reflexive dismantling of the narrative object.

In "Chapter Five: Ishmael Reed: (Afro-)American History Broke-Down," this metafictional matrix of metaphor and collage is approached from the perspective of the African-American tradition of "signifyin(g)." Through a close reading of Reed's *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* (1967), *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969), and *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), this chapter describes the network of linguistic, rhetorical, and ideological structures involved in the game of signifyin(g) play and compares

this network of relations to the parodic, intertextual structures and deconstructive practices at work in the high ironic metafictions of Coover and Barthelme. In this chapter it is proposed that Reed's concept of "neo-HooDoo" takes the signifyin(g) relations of ironic play in a new directions and anticipates the post-postmodern shift towards more sincere and/or non-ironic forms of narrative.

In the final section of this study, "Conclusion: Post-Postmodernism and the Legacy of the High Ironic," the uncertain future of the mode of high irony is discussed. Through a brief analysis of the after-effects of postmodern literary innovation and the consequences of narrative self-reflexivity, the change from the postmodern to the post-postmodern is followed through examples from the works of Kathy Acker, Lynne Tillman, Bret Easton Ellis, and David Foster Wallace. Of special importance in this concluding chapter is the contemporary American attitude towards irony and the subversive politics of ironic narrative, for as is very convincingly argued by Wallace and a number of his contemporaries, the question of the future of irony is of tremendous cultural relevance. As Wallace writes in "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," analysis of narrative irony is essential because "irony and ridicule are entertaining and effective, and . . . at the same time they are agents of a great despair and stasis in U.S. culture, and . . . for aspiring fictionists they pose terrifically vexing problems" (171). This chapter will attempt to trace the implications of these "vexing" literary problems and examine irony's capacity (or incapacity) to address them.

In this somewhat polemical conclusion, it is proposed that the modal ascent (as indicated by the protagonist/narrator's expanded power of action) sparked by the high ironic movement into the realm of abstraction has failed to usher in a new

dominant mode of myth. Rather than a return to myth, the contemporary decline of the high ironic mode suggests a potential trajectory of modal descent back towards the threshold of experience. Should this descent occur, it would likely lead to a further curtailment of the protagonist/narrator's power of action and, presumably, a return to a more conventional, mimetic mode of narrative discourse (along with its attendant forms of referentiality). In this final section, the post-postmodern gesture towards a more sincere "depth of feeling," as well as the post-postmodern proposition of "anti-ironic" narrative forms, are considered and some of the problematics surrounding the nature of these contemporary developments are discussed.[6] Of special emphasis in this concluding assessment of the post-postmodern is the sense, shared by many twenty-first century fiction writers and critics, that the age of irony has come to a close.

Although the age of irony may or may not be on the wane, its many self-reflexive textual effects and dissimulative rhetorical affects remain very active within the televisual, hypertextual, and metafictional worlds of contemporary American culture and society. And with this general "ironicisation" of the socio-cultural landscape (i.e., the establishment of a radically orthodox consumer irony),[7] changes in the direction of literature must inevitably follow. Nevertheless, as the works of theorists and literary historians such as Frye, White, and Hutcheon, have made apparent throughout their own attempts to accurately describe and interpret the complex network of relations that contribute to the direction of literary change, a critical sensitivity to the ever-shifting relationship between language and literature is essential to any thorough analysis of literature.

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[6] See Charles B. Harris, "PoMo's Wake, I"; Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram." 192-93.
[7] See Morgan, "Learning to be a Man: Dilemmas and Contradictions of Masculine Experience," 112.

Through a close, critical investigation into where the high ironic mode exists in relation to precedent forms, in relation to contemporaneous events and contexts (both historical and linguistic), and, transideologically, in relation to the self-reflexive discourse it conducts with both the reader and itself, this dissertation conducts an analysis of the mode of irony and suggests that the multiple trajectories of 21st century American fiction are underwritten and informed by the narrative constructs and critical reformations of the high ironic mode.

CHAPTER ONE

MYTH, METAFICTION, AND THE HIGH IRONIC MODE

> Revolutionary periods are times in which the linguistic code of a generation or dominant social group of a culture comes under attack and gets revised.
>
> --- Hayden White, "The Problem of Change in Literary History," 1975

Crisis, Change, and the Context of Postmodern Metafiction

Not only were the 1960s a decade of extreme social change, political upheaval, and cultural/sub-cultural/counter-cultural revolution in America, this period witnessed a complete re-evaluation of the human experience and the ways and means of communicating that experience. Through the use of mind-altering drugs and spiritualities, through the manipulation of various types of media and technology, through psychological explorations of self, identity, and persona, and especially through a comprehensive overhaul of literary, linguistic and socio-cultural systems of discourse, young American writers of the sixties co-opted, subverted, and attempted to re-draft the very concept of reality.[8]

As Patricia Waugh writes in *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, the sudden emergence in the sixties of a highly influential youth counter-culture, "with an attendant growth in political and psychological awareness about issues such as race, war, gender and technology," led to a disavowal of

[8] In the foreword to his *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), John Barth writes: "The High Sixties, like the Roaring Twenties, was a time of more than usual ferment in American social, political, and artistic life. Our unpopular war in Vietnam, political assassinations, race riots, the hippie counterculture, pop art, mass poetry readings, street theater, vigorous avant-gardism in all the arts, together with dire predictions not only of the death of the novel but of the moribundity of the print medium in the electronic global village – those flavored the air we breathed then, along with occasional tear gas and other contaminants." See Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse,* vii-viii.

orthodox literary practices and precepts (especially those incapable of articulating this new awareness) and initiating a turn towards absurdism, black humour, and innovative literary means of parodic subversion (115). The consequence of this literate, self-critical, and highly psycho-politicized awareness, Waugh states, "has been a strong tendency in US writers to respond to the anonymous, frenetic and mechanized society they see around them with fiction that is similarly depersonalized, hyperactive and over- or under-systematized" (115-16). And the literary form that emerged from this frenetic matrix is what is now referred to as "metafiction."[9]

According to Waugh, the metafictional impulse that began in the sixties "represents a response to a crisis," a crisis not simply in culture, but also a crisis in the act of narrative communication itself (65). The metafictional response to this crisis that developed in the sixties represents an attempt to, in Waugh's words, "'defamiliarize' fictional conventions that have become both automated and inauthentic, and to release new and more authentic forms" (65). The young American vanguard that ushered in this age of metafiction applied parodic means to attack these "automated and inauthentic" literary structures because, as Waugh explains, "Parody, as a literary strategy, deliberately sets itself up to break norms that have become conventionalized" (65). In the sixties, metafictional practice became an invaluable mechanism of change by virtue of its capacity to expose and make *explicit* these literary norms—through parody and other ironic formal inversions—thereby,

[9] William H. Gass's original definition of the neologism, "metafiction," is also perhaps the most insightful. In *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (1971), Gass writes: "There are metatheorems in mathematics and logic, ethics has its linguistic oversoul, everywhere lingos to converse about lingos are being contrived, and the case is no different in the novel. I don't mean merely those drearily predictable pieces about writers who are writing about what they are writing, but those . . . in which the forms of fiction serve as the material upon which further forms can be imposed." See Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life,* 24-25.

facilitating a critical interrogation of the "*implicit* cultural and literary codes" that were discovered to be imbedded in these literary conventions (66, Waugh's emphasis). Through this fundamentally *meta*-fictional process of critical deconstruction and ironic reconstruction, Waugh writes, "parody thus discovers which forms can express which contents, and its *creative* function releases them for the expression of contemporary concerns" (69, Waugh's emphasis). For many American writers in the sixties, metafictional parody was seen as a powerfully subversive literary tool and an innovative means of describing authentic experience.

Paradoxically, this new and supposedly more authentic means of articulation is also, by virtue of its *meta*-fictional nature, more fictional, more artificial, and even makes this artificiality the very selling point in its claims of enhanced authenticity. However, the ironic feedback of this paradox is an awareness that articulated experience is no less vital and authentic for its inherent artificiality, further, articulated experience *is reality* to the extent that reality is capable of being or becoming manifest through articulation (artificial or otherwise) — recalling Paul Ricoeur's reminder in *Time and Narrative* that, "human action can be narrated . . . because it is always already symbolically mediated" (57) and Claire Colebrook's statement in *Irony in the Work of Philosophy*, that, "Speech is not some act of representation added on to the world, speech itself is an event of the world's own force and becoming" (58). And if reality is, indeed, an inherently manufactured, narrative construct, the closer one gets to that event, to that precise act of articulation or narration, the closer one gets to the vital moment of experience itself. As Jacob Horner states in John Barth's *The End of the Road* (1958):

> To turn experience into speech — that is, to classify, to categorize, to conceptualize, to summarize, to sanctify it is always a betrayal of

> experience, a falsification of it; but only so betrayed can it be dealt with at all, and only in so dealing with it did I ever feel a man, alive and kicking. (366-67)

The upshot of this realization of a fundamentally narrative/narrated reality, as Mas'ud Zavarzadeh points out in *The Mythopoeic Reality*, is an awkward, postmodern awareness of the impossibility of any "central, all-encompassing view" or "comprehensive scheme of reality" (9). As a result, such totalizing, grand modernist paradigms as monadic subjectivity, autonomy, and institutionalized "authoritative discourse" suddenly lose their ethical and political sustainability and are replaced by the proliferating idiolects, rhizomatic multiplicities, and globalized paranoias of postmodern discourse.[10] "Consequently," Zavarzadeh writes, "the forms of recent narrative literature have changed so radically that the present seems to be more a mutation than a continuation of the past" (9). But, given that literary and cultural change is constant, has this radical postmodern "mutation" of consciousness and literary practice actually distanced the present from the past, experience from articulation, or has it brought them closer together?

According to Hayden White, this type of revolutionary mutation is a necessary element of literary innovation and signals a "historically significant" re-assessment of the linguistic nature of culture and human experience. As White claims in "The Problem of Change in Literary History":

> Literary innovation must be presumed to be going on all the time, in the same way that speech innovation must be conceived to be continuous. But *historically significant literary innovation* is possible only at those times in which the potential audiences for a given form of literary work have been so constituted as to render unintelligible or banal both the

[10] For a description of the socio-cultural implications of what Jean-François Lyotard terms "metanarrative" and what M. M. Bakhtin describes as "authoritative discourse," see Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, xxiii-xxv; Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 342-346.

> messages and the modes of contact that prevailed in some preceding era. (108, White's emphasis)

This revolution of the literary field through deconstruction, White argues, "represents a transformation in the relationship between 'literature' and 'language in general,'" such that the "whole linguistic code" becomes an object of revisionary attack and, once transformed, gives rise to an entirely new sense of reality ("The Problem of Change" 110-11). As this process takes place, antiquated systems of communication are jettisoned and new linguistic connections are established. And central to this transformation is the expansion of the act of narration (discussed in greater detail later in the chapter), which places an increased emphasis on the participative experience of the reader's involvement with the text and institutes an entirely new relationship between author and audience.

This literary revolution, White contends in *Metahistory*, occurs at the level of mode, specifically the mode of irony (10-11). Essentially following the cyclical system of modal progression proposed in Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, White alleges that the rhetorically and tropologically subversive nature of modal irony, concordant with its "awareness of its *own* inadequacy as an image of reality," anticipates an imminent return to the mode of myth (10, White's emphasis). However, does a return to the mode of myth adequately explain the postmodern metafictional project of deconstructing and parodically re-articulating the narrative structure of reality?

As the following section of this chapter will attempt to illustrate, critical analysis of this theory of modal progression (i.e., the cycle from myth to irony and back again to myth), examination of the Aristotelian basis of this theory, and the

application of modal theory to metafictional practice indicates an urgent need to revise this concept of modal progression.

Rather than following the prescribed cyclical pattern that Hayden White, Northrop Frye, and other theorists have proposed,[11] the course of modal progression appears to be fixed to a threshold of experience: an experientially normative axis which describes the narrative protagonist's and/or the narrator's power of action relative to an assumed neutral audience. Analysis of this revised course of modal progression reveals that as the self-contained, textual object of modern fiction changes to the self-reflexive, intertextual vehicle of postmodern metafiction, there occurs a definitive shift in the active presence and agency of the narrative voice such that the narration itself begins to inhabit and expand the role of protagonist. Not only does this shift correspond to the postmodern movement away from more directly representational means of literary practice (especially discernable in the metafictional elevation of the semiotic signifier over the signified, as will be discussed later in this chapter and the chapter to follow), it also suggests the appearance of a new dominant ironic mode.[12]

As will be argued, the increase in the narrator's power of action typical of postmodern metafictional literature does not necessarily indicate an abrupt return to the mythic mode (though it does suggest a number of shared characteristics). Instead,

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[11] While the theory of a cyclical modal structure is most famously expounded in Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) and *Fables of Identity* (1963), this theory of a modal cycle also plays a prominent role in the narratological studies of Hayden White's *Metahistory* (1973), Robert Scholes's *Structuralism in Literature* (1974), and Robert Foulke and Paul Smith's *An Anatomy of Literature* (1972).

[12] In the introduction to *Narcissistic Narrative* Linda Hutcheon comes to a similar conclusion: "If language, as these [metafictional] texts suggest, constitutes reality (rather than merely reflecting it), readers become the actualizing link between history and fiction. But this does not occur on the model of traditional historical fiction, where history is meant to authenticate fiction on a product, or representation, level, but in a new (or at least newly articulated) mode." See Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative,* xiv.

what emerges is a decidedly advanced mode of "high irony" that, while maintaining its distinctly ironic quality, displays an enhanced tendency to deconstruct and reconstruct myth, nonfiction, and other precedent narrative forms and archetypal elements (including popular media iconography, historical artifacts, and other culturally resonant miscellanea such as jokes, nursery rhymes, and fairy tales) into a discursive, highly self-reflexive type of parody. This high ironic parody, as will be discussed in this and subsequent chapters of this dissertation, is especially noticeable from the mid-sixties onward and is frequently encountered in (though not by any means limited to) the metafictional works of Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, and Ishmael Reed. In order to precisely define the characteristics of this emergent mode and explore its literary and theoretical implications, subsequent chapters of this dissertation will follow the high ironic mode through a selection of key metafictional texts including Barthelme's *Snow White* (1965), Reed's *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* (1967), and Coover's *Pricksongs and Descants* (1969)—a selection of works that display the early development of this mode and anticipate many of the metafictional practices that characterize the American writing of the late 20th century and that continue to shape the forms and formulations of contemporary fiction today.

As the parodic, metafictional structure of the high ironic mode may or may not lead to a return to the mode of myth—attendant with the significant political, ethical, and social ramifications of such a return—such an hypothesis remains merely a presumption until a substantial connection is proved to exist. It is this modal connection that this dissertation proposes to scrutinize through an analysis of the high ironic mode in postmodern theory and in metafictional practice.

Modal Theory and its Basis in Aristotelian Poetics

In the first essay of his *Anatomy of Criticism* Northrop Frye enumerates what he terms the five modal elevations of the fictional hero's "power of action" (33). Beginning, ostensibly, with the mode of myth, the fictional hero descends from an initially powerful state of divine eminence and supremacy into a cyclical pattern of ever-diminishing agency. According to Frye, this cycle essentially follows a progression of "plausible adaptations" or "displacements" whereby the narrative patterns of each mode are subsequently re-cast in ever more realistic terms (51).[13] With each modal descent the hero's power of action gradually dwindles, culminating in the mode of irony where the hero is rendered all but powerless.

These five modes and their respective protagonists (taken in fragments from Frye's analysis) may be paraphrased along the following lines:

1. Mythic hero: "superior in *kind* both to other men and to the environment of other men, the hero is a divine being."

2. Romantic hero: "superior in *degree* to other men and to his environment, the hero is the typical hero of romance."

3. High mimetic hero: "superior in *degree* to other men but not to his natural environment, the hero is a leader."

4. Low mimetic hero: "superior neither to other men nor to his environment, the hero is one of us."

5. Ironic hero: "inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves, so that we have the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity." (*Anatomy* 33-34, Frye's emphasis)

Frye goes on to employ this table as the basis for his formulation of a revolving model of modal shift (*Anatomy* 35). He claims that the re-emerging "dim outlines of

[13] In *Northrop Frye and Critical Method*, Robert D, Denham explains: "'Displacement' is the term Frye uses to describe the tendency of fictions progressively to move, throughout the sequence of modes, from myth to verisimilitude." See Denham, *Northrop Frye and Critical Method,* 17.

sacrificial rituals and dying gods" indicates the "reappearance of myth in the ironic," and concludes that: "Our five modes evidently go around in a circle" (*Anatomy* 42). From such an analysis one might assume that the increasing incidence of mythical figures, fragments, and traces within the ironic mode presupposes a cyclical return to the mode of myth.

One immediate problem with this revolving, circular conception of modal shift is the fact that, if indeed the literary center of gravity has followed this rotating tendency to strip the fictional hero of his power of action and has progressed directly from mythopoesis to verisimilitude (*Anatomy* 52), how then does the ironic hero spuriously affect to scramble back onto the vacant mythic throne and re-proclaim his ascendancy? And further, does the ironic appraisal of the mythic mode attendant with its characteristic inter-twisting of satirical critique, philological pastiche, and other parodic deconstructions of archetypal structures necessarily imply its direct proximity to the mythic mode?

Consideration of these problems reveals a number of significant weaknesses in this proposed cycle of modal progression.

Firstly, in considering the progressive fall in the hero's power of action from the mode of myth to that of irony, would not a direct modal shift from the ironic back into the mythic mode suggest an interminable erosion of the hero's power of action? And, ignoring the possibility for some completely random leap in power of action, what kind of mythology could support such an impotent, anti-heroic protagonist? Furthermore, where does the problematic duplicity of postmodern metafiction figure into Frye's structural mechanism? For example, what are we to make of such parodic, metafictional "possessings" of literary myth and archetype as John Barth's

Chimera, Donald Barthelme's *Snow White*, Robert Coover's *Briar Rose,* Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo,* and Kathy Acker's *Don Quixote*?[14] And finally, assuming that the progressive shift in the dominant mode has not yet completed its full return to myth, then, where are we now, and why is contemporary narrative still so ironic?

The answer to these riddles is found—in part—in the very basis of the theory of modal shift that Frye derives from Aristotle's *Poetics*. Summarizing the second paragraph of the *Poetics* (1448a, 1-5),[15] Frye writes that, "In some fictions, [Aristotle] says, the characters are better than we are [*spoudaios*], in others worse [*phaulos*], in still others on the same level [*toioútos*]" (33).[16] While scholars of the *Poetics* tend to vary in the definition of these terms, a general translation of *spoudaios* (*σπουδαῖος*) is likely to include: serious, of high character, heroic, figuratively weighty – and a definition of *phaulos* (*φαῦλος*) might include: frivolous, of low character, ordinary, figuratively light.[17] Although the precise English definition of these terms appears elusive, what this paragraph does clearly indicate is that in Aristotle's dialectical assessment of the protagonist's power of action a definite threshold of experience is implied as an axis.

This threshold, which marks the line between Aristotle's opposed classes of *spoudaios* and *phaulos*, not only designates the point at which these terms diverge/converge, but might also perform the role indicated by Aristotle's mysterious

[14] While this study will be focusing primarily upon American metafiction, it is important to recognize that similar Anglophone trends in metafictional parody and postmodern "mythical revisionism" have also developed in Canada (Margaret Atwood, Chris Scott, and Rudy Wiebe), Britain (including works by Angela Carter, Tanith Lee, Terry Prattchet, and A.S. Byatt) and Australia (Margo Lanagan and Angela Slatter).

[15] See R. Kassel, ed., *Aristotle's Ars Poetica*, 1448a, 1-5.

[16] Robert Scholes presents a similar synthesis of Aristotle in his *Structuralism in Literature*: "These primary modes of fiction are . . . based on three possible relations between any fictional world and the world of experience. A fictional world can be better than the world of experience, worse than it, or equal to it." See Scholes, *Structuralism in Literature*, 32.

[17] See Butcher, ed., *Poetics,* 11; Else, *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument,* 68, 77-78; Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism,* 33; and House, *Aristotle's Poetics,* 82.

intimation of an ordinary average or "third class" (Else 79).[18] Although highly contested, this third class is inferred through Aristotle's use of the term *toioútos* (τοιοῦτος) in the phrase, "*ἢ καί τοιοῦτος"* (1448a5), which has been rendered as: "or also men like (it?)" (Else 68), "or exactly as they are" (Twining 7), and "or exactly such as we ourselves are" (Warrington 5). Seeing this to indicate an independent category, this passage has been interpreted by Johannes Sykutris as a suggestion of a tripartite synthetic rather than a bipartite analytic (Else 79, n.54) and by Augusto Rostagni as a discrete "Mean" or intermediate character type in Aristotle's system (*Aristotele Poetica* 9).[19] However, regardless of whether this phrase indicates an intermediary type, a synthesis, or simply represents an awkward addendum to the original (as has also been proposed),[20] Aristotle's dichotomy makes a threshold not only logically necessary as a means of delineation between *spoudaios* and *phaulos*, but also necessary as a means of relating the specific conditions of this delineation to an audience that might provide the normative function of projecting *itself* as an intermediary device, and thereby, in a very real sense, becoming the threshold itself.

Such a threshold of experience would suggest that the shift in the level of the fictional hero's power of action is always relative to this projected, normative

[18] In *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument*, Gerald F. Else outlines the subtleties of Aristotle's ethical distinction: "1. The dichotomy is moral, but not in the Platonic, much less in a Christian sense. 2. It denotes, not virtue and vice as states, but two different attitudes toward virtue. The *spoudaîoi* are those who strive for it, who spend their lives, and if necessary lose them, for the prize of aretê. The *jaûloi* are those who do not. They are not vicious but 'no-account,' those who spend their lives making money, or 'having fun,' or both." See Else, *Aristotle's Poetics,* 77. For a more thorough analysis of the centuries long debate over the various renderings and interpretations of *spoudaios* and *phaulos.* See also Golden "Aristotle, Frye, and the Theory of Tragedy," 50; Reeves, The "Aristotelian Concept of the Tragic Hero," 172-188; and Smithson, "The Moral View of Aristotle's Poetics," 3-17.

[19] Else challenges the veracity of these claims, stating: "The dichotomy is… absolute and comprehensive. All men *who act*… are necessarily either *spoudaîoi* or *φαῦloi*; there is no room for a third class." See Else, *Aristotle's Poetics,* 77.

[20] Else, *Aristotle's Poetics,* 79-82.

audience (i.e., a reader presumed to be more or less neutral in power of action).[21] As a normative axis or "degree zero" to the protagonist's power of action, this threshold also marks the border between two separate realms of literature, referred to here as the realm of identification (marked by the forms relating to the *phaulos*) and the realm of abstraction (marked by the forms related to the *spoudaios*). As far as the fictional hero's power of action is concerned, the realm of identification contains and is defined by those narrative modes wherein the hero or narrator's power of action and level of experience is either inferior to or equivalent with that of an assumed neutral audience, such as in the low mimetic and ironic modes. Likewise, the realm of abstraction contains and is defined by those narrative modes wherein the hero or narrator exhibits a power of action discernibly superior to that of an assumed neutral audience, such as in the high mimetic, romantic and mythic modes.

However, in order for the power of action dialectic that this threshold delineates to have any stable critical application at all, a revised model of modal shift must permit the literary mode to tend toward the mythic not as the next stage in a rotating cycle of "eternal recurrence," but only when describing a helical pattern of perpetual, repetitive difference. In this revised model it is proposed that the dominant fictional mode passes from dominant modal phase to dominant modal phase ever downward into the realm of identification—charting the decrease in the hero's power of action as observed in the shift from the high mimetic into the low mimetic and the

[21] In *An Anatomy of Literature*, Robert Foulke and Paul Smith refer directly to the reader's normative function in their interpretation of mode: "We will define the term *mode* as a conventional assumption about the nature and limits of a central character's power of action. The definition implies something like an agreement between the author's preliminary ideas and the reader's consequent expectations of a fictional world. When we read a literary work and respond to its mode, we attempt to reconstruct the conditions or terms under which such a concept of action is possible. We become part of that audience contemporary with the writer to the extent that we understand and for the moment assent to his assumptions about what men can do or think that they can do." See Foulke and Smith, *An Anatomy of Literature,* 14.

ironic—before entering a pre-mythic stage of modal ascent—marking the discernable increase in the narrator's power of action as the mode shifts from the ironic to the higher modal position that it inhabits in the postmodern and post-postmodern periods. As the dominant mode follows this spiral movement through the realms of this dialectic, narrative patterns, archetypes, and other aesthetic forms of the past are projected diachronically forward through the matrix of the constantly evolving dominant mode, providing the linguistic fundament upon which each successive literary or linguistic act is superimposed, like beams of light being cast from the lower levels of a spiraling glass staircase, reflecting, refracting, and sending up shadows from the depths of literary precedent.

This spiral structure explains the profound presence of the mythic in the high ironic mode, for from a certain perspective (i.e., looking diachronically back through the modal matrix), these two modes appear to occupy a similar modal and semiotic position, however, the temporal distance between these modes (i.e., the time taken for this spiraling modal progression to return to a similar dialectical location) explains their obvious differences in epistemology and linguistic structure. Though this model indicates that an actual return to the mode of myth might be deferred indefinitely, such a model would suitably account for both the temporal component of epochal gravitation (i.e., the perpetual progression of the dominant mode through the two realms of the dialectic) and the modal variance in power of action without resulting in the inexplicable "leap" that would obtain in the resolution of Frye's modal cycle.

As indicated above, such a dialectical spiral would preclude any kind of dominant shift towards the mode of mythical narrative discourse as it is already

known in precedent forms of mythopoesis. In place of this return what is seen to develop as the dominant mode ascends, during the postmodern period, into the realm of abstraction is an advanced mode of irony, or "high irony," wherein the protagonist is expanded out of a specific narrative position and into the language used to portray his/her actions while the narrative voice also begins to exhibit a power of action that tends to be equivalent to or greater than that of the reader. Within this emergent mode of irony, the narrative environment surrounding the protagonist/narrator is also typically subject to compositional modulations that alter both the protagonist's and the narrator's power of action, identity, and narrative environment. As a result, the line separating the protagonist/narrator and the narrative environment often appears arbitrary, absent, or reversed, such that the narrative world seems to morph and twist capriciously, without apparent purpose to the progress of the narrative, or simply at the whim of the protagonist/narrator.

As the following passages illustrate, these alterations to the protagonist's and/or narrator's power of action, identity, and narrative environment result from the ironic foregrounding of the linguistic and rhetorical artificiality of the narrative as a verbal construct. This high ironic current of self-reflexive narration runs the gamut from zany slapstick, as in Robert Coover's "Cartoon," from *A Night at the Movies* (1987):

> With a heavy heart (what a universe!), he goes into the bathroom to flush the cartoon car down the toilet and discovers, glancing in the mirror, that, above the cartoon napkin still tucked into his collar like a lolling tongue, he seems to have grown a pair of cartoon ears. They stick out from the sides of his head like butterfly wings. Well, well, he thinks, wagging his new ears animatedly, or perhaps being wagged by them, there's hope for me yet . . . (139)

… to the deranged, quotidian meanderings of Richard Brautigan's *Trout Fishing in*

America (1967):

> Around five o'clock in the afternoon of my cover for Trout Fishing in America, people gather in the park across the street from the church and they are hungry.
>
> It's sandwich time for the poor.
>
> But they cannot cross the street until the signal is given. Then they all run across the street to the church and get their sandwiches that are wrapped in newspaper. They go back to the park and unwrap the newspaper and see what their sandwiches are all about. (2)

… to the dialogized, macabre of Joyce Carol Oates's eponymous parody of Henry James's "The Turn of the Screw," from her 1972 story collection, *Marriages and Infidelities*:

> *Tuesday, July 6.*
> A Wide stony beach. Pebbles big as hands. Here the sky is bluer than it is at home. Got out of the hotel before anyone could say hello – need to be alone after last night. Uncle and his hacking cough! Stayed up most of the night with him. His coughing is like the noise of the earth [. . .]
>
> *Tuesday, July 6.*
> Alone here, hidden, sick at heart. Away from that horrible numerosity. The oppression of the London sky, terraces bathed in evil light, the tonnage of history, too many horizons brought up short . . . . Chimneys that mock, beckon. Stained and weathered like cheeses. . . . (363)

While each of these metafictional texts develops a vastly different plot, syntax, and aesthetic, they each parodically explore a set of conventions (Coover, the vocabulary of pop-culture fantasy; Brautigan, literary journalism; Oates, 19th century stylistics). And as these passages demonstrate, within the high ironic mode, this type of critical, parodic exploration can be led wherever the narrator sees fit: from one parodic frame to another, from one system of logic to another, and from the comfortable confines of literary convention to the linguistic disintegration of reality.

But even as reality dissolves, there is running through each of these passages a distinct, almost familiar sense of interiority, a sense of being inside the moment of

experience as it becomes language and (through articulation and enumeration) changes into narrative. Gone is the paralyzing omniscience of the low ironic, totalizing gaze, replaced by the psychotic perspective of sub-persona imminence, of being allowed behind the mask (yet still being shown the world through the linguistic eye-holes of that mask) and even at times being allowed into the neurotic viscera of the narrative mind in production, and there, within, "discovering design in its seeming formlessness as a viewer of the night sky might read in its starry splatter the hidden pattern of the universe" as Coover puts it in "On Mrs. Willie Masters" (20). Through a foregrounding of language and syntax and a parodic overlapping of contradictory perspectives, parodic texts like those above intimate that from within the "seeming formlessness" of experience will always emerge the interpretive design of narrative.

Analysis of the linguistic process behind this parodic metafictional practice reveals that the extreme heightening of the degree of the artificiality—through structural innovation, the use of bizarre vernacular or nonsense language, random or protracted digression, disorienting shifts in narrative direction or point of view, emphasis on the arbitrary nature of the narration, etc.—has the effect of enhancing the degree of the narrator's power of action by severely undermining any presupposed limitations to the exercise of that power.[22] And attendant with this sense that anything could happen at any moment, the expansion of the narrator's power of action suggests a modal trajectory away from the realm of identification and ever

[22] Larry McCaffery writes: "These formal features, along with more blatant devices (such as having the narrator of a work engage the reader in a dialogue about the book he is reading), force us to consider the book we are reading *as an artifact*, undercutting the realistic impulses of the work and turning it into a 'self-reflexive' creation in that it not only takes art as its subject but tries to be its own subject," quoted in Currie, *Metafiction,* 183.

further into the realm of abstraction.

These shifts in the protagonist's and narrator's power of action thereby appear to maneuver the mode to an intermediary position between the mode of "low irony" (i.e., Frye's "ironic mode") and myth. However, unlike the low ironic mode, which typically derives its narrative structures through "the application of romantic mythical forms to a more realistic content" (Frye 223), the high ironic mode is more: the displacement of precedent narrative forms—especially myth and nonfiction —to a parodically self-reflexive context. And as a more abstract and narratorially expansive mode of ironic narrative discourse it is more open to the free mixing and re-configuration of parody and parodic forms—political satire upon picaresque lampoon, such as in Kathy Acker's *Don Quixote* or Donald Barthelme's *The King,* parody upon parody, as in William H. Gass's *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife*, or even the *risus purus* of parody upon parody upon parody, as in Robert Coover's "On Mrs. Willie Masters"[23]—thereby offering a means of simultaneously interrogating precedent forms of narrative and bringing the subversive edge of irony to bear on the text's own formulations.

As Linda Hutcheon writes in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, "The collective weight of [postmodern] parodic *practice* suggests a redefinition of parody as repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity" (26, Hutcheon's emphasis). And few modes of narrative are more open for metafictional parody than myth and nonfiction. However, rather than simply "re-telling" forms of myth or history in a contemporary and, therefore, automatically ironic setting (as is common in low ironic parody and in works of postmodern

[23] In *Watt,* Samuel Beckett writes "the laugh of laughs, the *risus purus*, the laugh laughing at the laugh, the beholding, the saluting of the highest joke. . . ." See Beckett, *Watt,* 48.

mythopoesis), high ironic parody is typically an accentuation of the already fabulous and/or grandly authoritative narrative source material and is most often set in a mutated world of factual and fictional equivalencies—a world certainly unlike any world previously experienced by the reader in any kind of extra-textual context.

The semiotic transparency of myth and the concrete materiality of history make both of them ideal narrative templates for metafictional parodic re-appropriation. However, rather than dealing with both sets of parodic relations at once, this dissertation will first consider the structure of the high ironic re-appropriation of mythical forms prior to returning to the question of high ironic re-deployments of history and nonfictional forms in the following chapter.

Myth as a Formal Template

According to Claude Lévi-Strauss's analysis in "The Structural Study of Myth," its revisable flexibility of form and amenity to new narrative formats are some of the defining characteristics of myth. Lévi-Strauss writes:

> [The] substance [of myth] does not lie in its style, its original music, or its syntax, but in the *story* which tells it. Myth is language functioning on an especially high level where meaning succeeds practically at "taking off" from the linguistic ground on which it keeps rolling. (430-31, Lévi-Strauss's emphasis)

Because myth is made to be passed from generation to generation, voice to voice, place to place, in an always already adaptive style of narrative transmission, its ephemeral, easily manipulable semiotic structure makes myth a ready template for metafictional parody.[24] Within this mode myth becomes, in a sense, a formal

[24] In *Narcissistic Narrative,* Linda Hutcheon writes: "Parody, according to the formalist theoreticians, is the result of a conflict between realistic motivation and an aesthetic motivation which has become weak and has been made obvious. The consequence is the unmasking of the system or of the creative

"stencil" to be traced and refashioned to suit whatever target the parodist deems worthy of attack. Case in point is Donald Barthelme's parodic *Snow White* (for a more thorough analysis of Barthelme's *Snow White*, see also Chapter Four).

Although Donald Barthelme's *Snow White* could never, by any stretch of the imagination, be categorized as a more realistic reinterpretation of Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm's "Little Snow-White" (1812), nor even an adaptation of the version forwarded in Walt Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937), Barthelme certainly owes the reader's familiarity with the tale's characters and plot structure to precedent versions of the tale.[25] As Barthelme remarks in an interview with Larry McCaffery, "Again, the usefulness of the Snow White story is that everybody knows it and it can be played against. . . . Every small change in the story is momentous when everybody knows the story backward. . . ." (in LeClair and McCaffery 42-43). And as is typical of narrative irony, this familiarity (e.g., the reader's expectation that the princess be lovely, the witch evil, the dwarves loyal) is methodically drawn upon and subverted during the course of the novel. But what makes Barthelme's high ironic version of the tale more of a parody *on* parody — rather than a formal low ironic parody or a simple retelling of the myth — are the following:

1) Barthelme's *Snow White* employs a host of shifting narrators (each character randomly throwing in a new voice and perspective), thereby constantly undermining the development of any sense of narrative

process whose function has given way to mechanical convention. It is as if a dialectic were established, as if this parodied material were background to the new forms and thus a formal synthesis effected. If a new parodic form does not develop when an old one becomes insufficiently motivated, the old form tends to degenerate into pure convention; witness the popular traditional novel, the best-seller." See Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative,* 24.

[25] For an exhaustive overview of the many varieties of "Snow White" and other variations of Aarne-Thompson-Uther type 709, see D. L. Ashliman's *Folklore and Mythology: Electronic Texts* website hosted by the University of Pittsburgh. <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/type0709.html>.

coherence or narratorial identity and, thereby, expanding the narrative agency of the narrator beyond a single position.

2) Barthelme's *Snow White* maintains a self-conscious, deceptively transparent attitude towards its borrowed theme, the narrative forever on the verge of establishing thematic parallels to the traditional form of the narrative only to see them systematically destroyed. [26]

3) Barthelme's version uses the hollowed-out shell of the myth to conduct carefully structured intertextual attacks on the very cultural discourses that directly and indirectly act to maintain the "Snow White" narrative pattern and system of logic as cultural institutions (e.g., phallocentrism, psychoanalysis, rationality, courtly love).[27]

4) Barthelme's *Snow White* relies more upon the rhetorical mixing and juxtaposing of various patterns and forms than upon the dislocation of a single narrative pattern (e.g., Barthelme's paraphrase of Freud's "On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love" which introduces Snow White's exhaustive list of potential princes [82-83]).

Another important feature of the multi-layer parody used in Barthelme's *Snow White* derives from the fact that, because the historical time period within the narrative has

[26] In a certain sense, complex parody of this kind exists more as an example of meta-irony than pure irony while also giving the distinct impression of being more meta-myth than myth; a reminder of Lévi-Strauss's statement that, "we define the myth as consisting of all its versions; to put it otherwise: a myth remains the same as long as it is felt as such." See Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," 435.

[27] The politically critical approach of high irony often assumes an apostatic attitude towards simulation, superficially feigning to inhabit the anagogic structures that it parodies while simultaneously evacuating them of stable*, a priori* meaning. However, as Lutz Röhrich points out in *Gebärde – Metapher – Parodie*, new meaning is created through revision: "Parodistische Veränderungen vorgegebenen Traditionsmaterials dürfen nicht nur negativ als Zersungenes oder Zersagtes angesehen werden. Sie offenbaren zugleich auch einen Prozess sprachlicher Umbildung und Neubildung" [Parodic modifications of given traditional material may not only be regarded negatively as destroyed solutions or destroyed speech. They reveal at the same time also a process of linguistic reorganization and reformation] (my translation). See Röhrich, *Gebärde – Metapher – Parodie,* 221.

been warped beyond recognition, the contemporary idioms, items, and historical references scattered throughout the novel (e.g., references to trench warfare [63], Snow White as a "goddamn degenerate" [98], *National Geographic* [124], etc.) never seem to resonate any "real world" environment, nor even a recognizable "fairytale world" environment. Instead, these items and idioms act to establish a hybrid, fairytale-meets-quotidian "textscape" that seems ever on the verge of collapsing under the weight of its own bloated linguistic structures.

Barthelme's use of parody as a platform for the forensic dissection of fairy tale archetypes and, indeed, the narrative act itself (both as a formal network of linguistic relations and as a socio-culturally responsive matrix of ontological and epistemological systems), provides a perfect example of the attitude many postmodern authors have towards myth and mimesis as the mode tends ever more towards what Mas'ud Zavarzadeh describes as, ". . . a zone of experience where the factual is not secure or unequivocal but seems preternaturally strange and eerie, and where the fictional seems not at all that fictitious, remote and alien, but bears an uncanny resemblance to daily experience" (*The Mythopoeic Reality* 56). Although this topsy-turvy zone between factual fiction and fictional fantasy can be, at times, a disorienting experience for the reader to navigate, it is a necessary reminder that there is not, nor could there ever be "an accurate representation of the way the world is in itself" (Rorty 4). There are only the narrative accounts of encounters with this, that, or another world — all of which can be read ironically.

According to Hayden White's assessment in *Metahistory*, the intermediary stage of ironic modal development that attends this narrative rendering of reality, "prepares consciousness for its repudiation of all sophisticated conceptualizations of

the world and anticipates a return to a mythic apprehension of the world and its processes" (10). However, White's anticipation of a return to "mythic apprehension" need not require a literary return to the mode of myth in order to be encountered—myth continues to exist along side, within, and perhaps even through, its inversion and parodic deconstruction. Indeed, no qualification is required in stating that myth is resilient, regenerative, and as simple and prolific as a virus (to borrow an analogy from Burroughs). However, rather than acting as a generative narrative host for the material of myth, the parodic mythical forms of high ironic metafiction only share as much linguistic and rhetorical material with myth as is necessary to show that this material is not as empty and innocent as it might appear. Herein lies the critical difference between the mode of myth and the mode of high irony. For where narrative myth typically foregrounds its formal structures as a means of masking, or, camouflaging its hidden ideological content (a topic returned to in the following chapter), high ironic metafiction foregrounds its formal structures in order to display to the reader the various ways that ideology can be contained within and subverted by language.

As the following section will discuss, metafiction performs a similar semiotic function to myth in its capacity to shift the reader's attention toward the form. However, unlike the semiotic structure of myth, which conceals its message behind a perpetually changeable screen of empty signifiers and detached, transcendent signifieds, in the high ironic narrative this emphasis or foregrounding of form is instead aimed at magnifying the denotative instabilities and ironically variable connotations of the signifier and, thereby, multiplying the potential semiotic relations between the signifier and its myriad possible signifieds.

The discernable postmodern imbalance between signifier and signified, as Julia Kristeva points out in her essay, "Postmodernism?" characterizes metafiction as a literature of paradoxical expansion and reduction, a "literature which writes itself with the more or less conscious intention of expanding the signified, and thus human, realm" (137), yet is articulated to a such a diverse "degree of singularity" that "we are faced with idiolects, proliferating uncontrollably" (141). The result is a critical reduction of all conceptualizations of the world (whether "sophisticated," "human," or otherwise) to narrative descriptions of varying vocabulary and imaginative scope. At the same time, this shift also puts greater emphasis on the writer's paradoxically expanded, "singular" capacity to explore the nature of this vocabulary and the ideological content that exists within these imagined narrative structures.

Yet, even within the realm of abstraction, there seems to be a happy medium between a slide back towards convention and a complete loss of orbit. For as the high ironic mode ascends above the threshold of experience, narrative appears to increase in its *meta*-fictionality relative to its semiotic position above this threshold. This process occurs to the extent that increased proximity to the signifier and distance from the signified indicates the linguistic intensity of the metafiction. But when the signifier has been so completely detached from the signified that meaning creation is denied and the text begins to dissemble little more than itself, the signifying function of the narrative dissolves into complete incoherence.

The type of text resulting from such a complete semiotic dissolution might be thought of as akin to what Roland Barthes refers to as "receivable," the text beyond the denotative and connotative capacities of the "readerly" or "writerly," the indecipherable text that is only capable of exerting an uncertain sense of verbal

presence:[28]

> The *receivable* would be the unreaderly text which catches hold, the red-hot text, a product continuously outside of any likelihood and whose function—visibly assumed by its *scriptor*—would be to contest the mercantile constraint of what is written; this text, guided, armed by a notion of the *unpublishable*, would require the following response: I can neither read nor write what you produce, but I *receive* it, like a fire, a drug, an enigmatic disorganization. (*Roland Barthes,* 118, Barthes's emphasis)

This often happens at the extreme metafictional edge of the realm of abstraction and notable examples might include Ihab Hassan's random, computerized mash-up of the last 333 words of James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* and the last 333 words of Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* in the third section of Hassan's *Paracriticisms*:

> It them so then still though my one old words nor me silence go going until a hair soft whish nor the mad never two on and I it's abandon my hang last she far hang it mere wake two again full said of on . . . . (70-71)

The "receivable" is also immediately apparent in texts such as Nigel Tomm's *The Blah Story* (running to an utterly catatonic 11,300,000 "words"):[29]

> blah to blah her for blah dared to blah somewhenotodayoundressomecologicalinenumerousexyeslowillingnessshotstrangereactioneglectabulationumberightonightomorrowidoweremembersufficientogethernessobviousoomphilariousayourself. . . . (*Volume 19,* 3)

In "receivable" texts such as these, the relationship of denotation and connotation, signifier and signified, has been so completely removed as to render them

[28] In "The Semiotics of the Foreseen: Modes of Narrative Intelligibility in (Contemporary) Fiction," Zavarzadeh writes: "Barthes adds the mode of 'receivable' to the 'readerly' and 'writerly' as the edge of intelligibility where the narrative's interrogation of the prevailing patterns of sense making is not yet conceptualized." See Zavarzadeh, "The Semiotics of the Foreseen," 611. For a definition of these terms in their original context, see Barthes, *S/Z,* 3-5; and Barthes, *Roland Barthes,* 116-19.

[29] According to Wikipedia, Nigel Tomm's novel ranks second for longest self-published or controversial novel, situated between Mark Leach's *Marienbad My Love* – 13 million words – and Henry Darger's *The Story of the Vivian Girls* – 9 million words. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_longest_novels>: 23 September, 2011.

functionally unintelligible.[30] The form of the form itself is taken as the focus and then zoomed in on to obscurity, re-/disorganized, or un-syntaxed to, thereby, separate the token from the referent, the signifier from the signified, essentially producing a pure textual object (i.e., Barthes's "product continuously outside of any likelihood") through a process of extreme auto-referentiality. But if a text is so semantically void that it can only obliquely refer to itself, is it still narrative?

According to Paul de Man's assessment in *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism*, the crucial aspect of narrative that these "receivable" texts displace (or conspicuously misplace) is not so much their referentiality to an external reality or a sense of *vraisemblance*, but rather a discernable point of view. As de Man states bluntly, "There can, indeed, be no narrative without point of view" (14). While this truism might appear to stand on its own as a reasonable point of narrative definition, de Man explores the case further and asks:

> . . . since the correlative of all narrative is the constitution of a "point of view" to be occupied by the narrator, what then is the subjective necessity that prompts the creation of such a privileged view point? Instead of showing that point of view exists for the sake of narrative – which is tautological – one should ask how and why narrative (in itself useless) exists for the sake of point of view. (14-15)

This one of the theoretical questions that high ironic metafiction attempts to critically investigate. And, as the next section of this chapter will argue, investigation of this question not only helps to define the semiotic location of metafiction in relation to both mythical and more representational forms of narrative, it also goes a long way in explaining the auto-critical orientation of metafictional parody as well as the radical repositioning of character and narrator that occurs in the high ironic mode.

[30] Mas'ud Zavarzadeh terms texts such as these, "(deliberate) ill-formedness." See Zavarzadeh, "Semiotics of the Foreseen," 611.

Towards a Semiotics of Metafiction

Firstly, in order to accurately define the characteristics of metafiction within the high ironic mode, it is necessary to locate it in comparison to other categories of contemporary narrative. By applying the revised structure of modal progression discussed earlier in the chapter to the semiotic model of narrative intelligibility that Zavarzadeh proposes in his essay, "The Semiotics of the Foreseen: Modes of Narrative Intelligibility in (Contemporary) Fiction," the precise delimitations and semiotic characteristics of nonfiction, metafiction, myth, realistic fiction become easier to compare (see Figure 1).

"In the first encounter with a narrative," Zavazadeh writes, "the reader's attempts to understand it evolve around situating the narrative on a grid of narratives with which he is familiar" (609). This process separates textual literature into four distinct zones of intelligibility, based initially upon the reader's reaction to the narrative at the linguistic level. According to Zavarzadeh's analysis: zone I, "Nonfiction," indicates a heightened emphasis being placed upon the direct, referential relationship between signifier and signified; zone II, "Metafiction," indicates a heightened emphasis upon the signifier but a lessening of emphasis upon the signified; zone III, "Myth," indicates a lessening of emphasis upon both signifier and signified; and zone IV, "Realistic Fiction," indicates a heightened emphasis upon the signified and a lessening of emphasis upon the linguistic signifier (613-18).

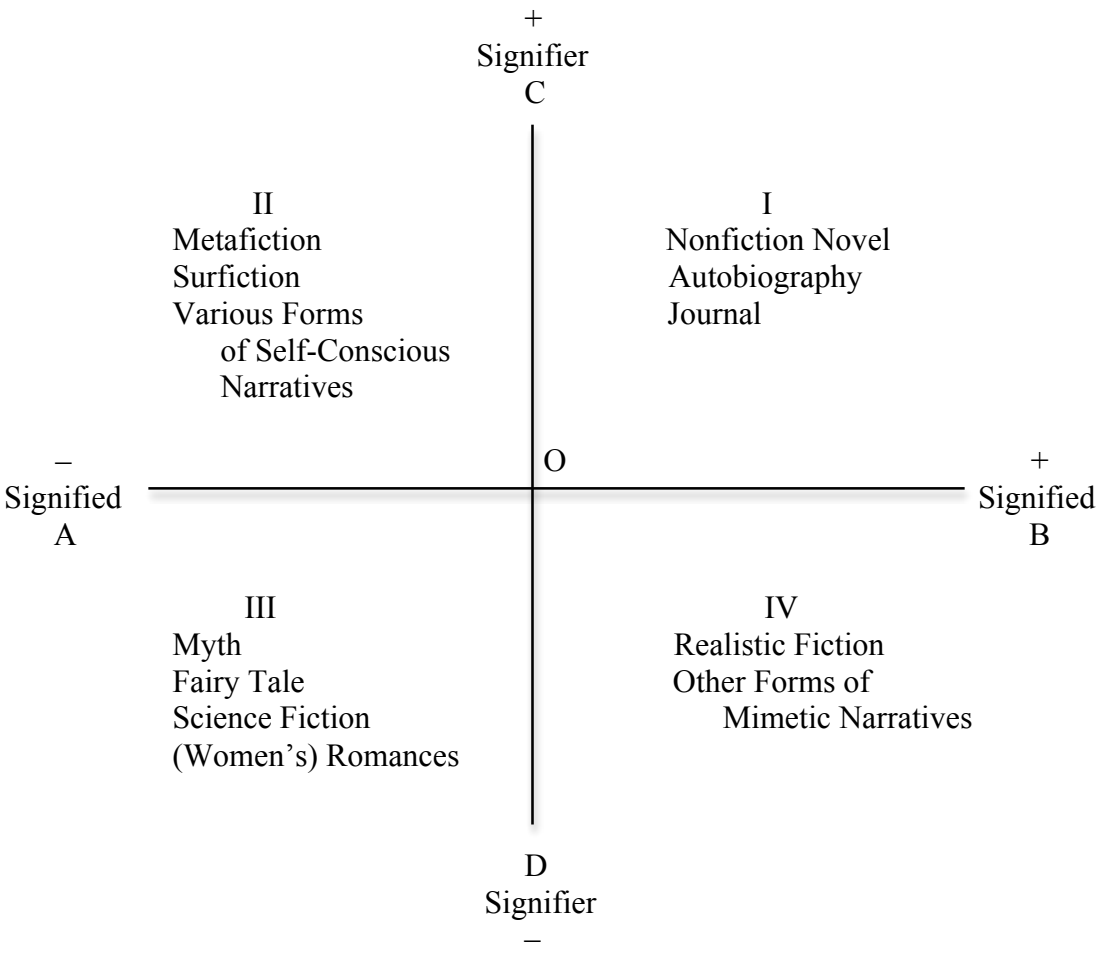

Figure 1. Diagram representing the semiotic relations between Zavarzadeh's four modes of narrative intelligibility: nonfiction, metafiction, myth, and realistic fiction. Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, "The Semiotics of the Foreseen: Modes of Narrative Intelligibility in (Contemporary) Fiction," *Poetics Today*, 6.4 (1985): 615.

Following Zavazadeh's model, the realm of identification (corresponding to zones I and IV), in a semiotic sense, indicates a significant proximity to the signified. Likewise, the realm of abstraction (corresponding to zones II and III) is marked by distance from the signified; and for metafiction specifically, distance from the signified and a proximity to the signifier. As the dominant mode tends towards one or another of these semiotic zones, the linguistic qualities (as well as the rhetorical tropes and figures that attend these qualities) shift accordingly. Furthermore,

tendency towards one or the other of these two realms indicates either a "centripetal" or "centrifugal" force, as Zavarzadeh explains:

> If the narrative foregrounds the conventions of narration and writing and consequently becomes an allegory of its own composition and internal semiosis, it is designated by readers as a *centripetal* narrative which is self-engendering and is preoccupied by its own materiality, or to use Saussure's term, the shape of its "signifier." On the other hand, if the fiction uses the conventions of narration and writing merely as a means for reaching outside those conventions, and therefore in the process of its semiosis conceals its own narrative apparatus, it is regarded by the reader as a *centrifugal* narrative. The centrifugal fiction is that which promises the discovery of an extra-textual terrain of experience and as such is centered on what it claims to represent, namely, its "signified." ("The Semiotics of the Foreseen" 614)

Because they are both essentially "centripetal" forms of narrative (i.e., revealing rather than concealing the semiotic forms and linguistic processes that constitute narrative structure), metafiction and myth share a common movement away from any kind of "extra-textual terrain of experience" and instead interpret and represent experience in an intertextual, symbolic and/or metaphorical manner. Most metafictional texts, however, resist a complete detachment from the signified and instead rely heavily upon a symbolically regulated, metaphorical gravitation back towards the signified for the establishment of intelligibility; hence the second order quality implied by the "meta-" prefix of metafiction. Ideally there is a constant feedback maintained between the metafictional proximity to the signifier and the force of the signifier's conceptual pull towards completing the semiotic loop; hence the centripetal tendency towards the "zero point."

This also explains, to some extent, the perpetual rotation of modal progression around the threshold of experience. For Zavarzadeh's "zero point" and the proposed threshold of experience should be thought of as analogous points of normative delineation; each describing a moment of intertextual and experiential

connectivity with a normative "ideal reader" and, in Zavarzadeh's system, the point from which this naturalizing process of narrative intelligibility is initiated ("The Semiotics of the Foreseen" 608). In metafiction there is a constant tension with this threshold or "zero point," a tension that keeps the mode from floating off into the indecipherable darkness of the "receivable," and yet locates and establishes the mode at a critical distance to mimetic convention.

Unlike the other three zones of narrative intelligibility that Zavarzadeh describes, each pulling in its own fashion away from this "zero point" — myth in its constant refusal of semiotic groundedness (despite its supposedly centripetal nature), nonfiction in its impossible desire for perfect semiotic groundedness, and realist fiction in its representational illusion of semiotic groundedness — metafiction attempts to tentatively ground itself in the experience of the reader. As Linda Hutcheon writes in *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*: —

> The linguistic self-reflexiveness or even self-generation of the text are forms of resistance to the act of reading, shifting attention to the semantic, syntactic, and often also phonetic texture of the words which actually serve to structure as well as constitute the work. This centripetal pull, however, does *not* cut the reader off from what has here been called 'vital' of life experience. While it is true that the work becomes a self-contained artificial unit, nevertheless, the extramural link is made through the process of fiction-making in language, the creation of worlds in words. (119)

And in requiring the reader's participative interaction with these "worlds in words," metafiction projects itself as a synthetic means of uniting and multiplying discourse by directly engaging with the fact that, as Zavarzadeh puts it, "one may never be able to move out of language systems" ("The Semiotics of the Foreseen" 620). Thus, more "receivable" examples of metafiction — in being covert attempts to move out of these language systems — fail to connect meaningfully to this centripetal

intertextuality and, in severing all semiotic ties binding signifier and signified, cause these textual structures to spin away from the forms and structures of intelligible narrative, becoming in the process merely arbitrary collections of symbols signifying nothing but themselves.

In metafiction, this constant binary pull towards and away from the threshold of experience (or "zero point") is regulated by the critical function of its fundamentally parodic nature. As Zavarzadeh stipulates, "Metafiction and other modes of self-reflexivity in narrative are grammatological interrogations of intelligibility itself, especially the public intelligibility as appropriated and narrated in mimetic fictions" (621); hence the metafictional tendency to parodic forms of grammatological and syntactical interference within this mode. And by virtue of its central semiotic position between myth and nonfiction, metafiction is capable of subjecting both to intense linguistic scrutiny, playing one off of the other, and then turning the interrogation in on itself (Zavarzadeh 621; Gasche 177-215). The inherently interrogative, critically self-reflexive, and ironically multiple nature of this mode make it, therefore, an ideal narrative environment for parody.

So how does the parodic nature of metafiction relate to de Man's query as to the how and why of narrative as a vehicle for point of view? Metafiction answers this question by way of its emphasis of the reader's role in the construction of point of view. And as a participative agent in the linguistic construction of this point of view, the reader's own perspective becomes just as important as the point of view tentatively offered and/or fractured by the metafictional narrative.[31] Indeed,

[31] In her own analysis of de Man, Claire Colebrook states, "The awareness of point of view . . . is given in ironic literature. It is only through the linguistic event of narration that points of view are effected." See Colebrook, *Irony in the Work of Philosophy,* 154-55.

metafiction turns de Man's question on its head and replies that point of view does not simply exist for the sake of narrative, nor does narrative exist merely as a vehicle for a privileged point of view, but rather, it is the reader that links the narration to the narrative, because it is the reader's active interaction with the narrator, as well as the interpretative strategies followed by the reader, that allow the narrative to exist in the first place.

As seen in the examples forwarded previously, by distancing the reader not only from conventional mimetic forms but also from conventional reading practices, metafiction intensifies the hermeneutic obligations, indeed, the ultimate hermeneutic *responsibilities* of the reader. And parody sets up a perfect environment for this process through its basic requirement that the reader develop a decoding strategy. This sets the reader at a critical distance to the text from the very outset, immediately changing the reader's direct relationship with the text (i.e., *reader — text — stable meaning*) to an indirect relationship mediated by reader's capacity to effectively navigate the forms of the parody, the encoded language, and the text's own interpretations of the parodic narrative (i.e., *reader — parodic code — decoding strategy — indefinite meaning[s]*). As Linda Hutcheon writes:

> . . . the parody and self-reflection of narcissistic narrative [i.e., metafiction] work to prevent the reader's identification with any character and to force a new, more active, thinking relationship upon him. It becomes increasingly clear that, though free to interpret, the reader is also responsible for his interpretation. (*Narcissistic Narrative* 49)

In metafiction this process is further highlighted by the writer's insertion of "metacommentary" into the narrative: self-reflexive observations, usually by the narrator, applied either as an imbedded self-critical device or as a frame-breaking

technique.[32] The reader of metafiction is thus charged with the double task of interpreting the narrative and then interpreting the narrative's imposed critique of that interpretation.

In many ways analogous to the writer's own self-conscious awareness of the fiction-making process, the reader's interaction with metafictional narrative requires a similar self-consciousness during the reading experience. This new, interactive reading experience, Hutcheon explains in *Narcissistic Narrative*, "is not one of being a consumer of stories, but rather one of learning and constructing a new sign-system, a new set of verbal relations" (14). Through this new set of verbal relations, the reader's historically passive role as the member of a voyeur audience — peeking through the lens of the narration at the *trompe l'oeil* of the fictional world — is re-structured into an active task of decryption. For as the work of metafiction draws both narrative and reader into the parodic realm of the ironically encrypted signifier, "The novel becomes a new and strange kind of code written almost in hieroglyphs and analogous in process to primitive myth or fairy tales" (*Narcissistic Narrative* 14). However, unlike in myth, where the narrator's point of view is secondary or even incidental to the context of the story, in high ironic metafiction these roles are reversed and point of view, in a very real sense, *becomes* the context of the story. According to Hutcheon, "This results in an added emphasis on diegesis, on the act of storytelling. In such fiction, the reader is temporally and spatially oriented in the fictional world by the act of narrating itself; the narrating figure is the centre of internal reference" (*Narcissistic Narrative* 51). In high ironic metafiction, point of

[32] See Jameson, "Metacommentary," 13.

view is raised to a primary position, greatly enhancing the narrator's power of action and expanding the imaginative potential of the narrative.

Few events in the evolution of literature have been more vital in multiplying the forms and formulations of narrative consciousness (and self-consciousness) than the advent of this expanded diegetic world-view. But by the same token, few events have gone so far to discompose and complicate these same structures. As Alan Wilde writes in "Irony in the Postmodern Age":

> Confronted with the world's randomness and diversity, [narrative irony] enacts an attitude (*urbi et orbi*) of what can most accurately be called *suspensiveness*. The tolerance, that is to say, of a fundamental uncertainty about the meanings and relations of things in the world and in the universe. (9)

The instability of this postmodern condition of "fundamental uncertainty" seems to compel writers working within the mode of high irony to gravitate beyond the threshold of experience in search of a means of articulating human experience that is capable of expressing its inherent ambiguity, turmoil, grotesqueness and beauty, and yet manages to escape the seductive inertia of literary voyeurism.

The low ironic "looking down upon" is thus revised to a "looking out from," a narrative approach that creates *suspensive* insight (as it is often fractured, incomplete, or inconsistent) into the protagonist's or narrator's selective point of view and thereby participatively involving the reader in the production of meaning. Another similar device common to high ironic fiction is the use of a narrator that seems interchangeable with the "author" and intermittently switches back and forth between the two;[33] the narrative voice is even frequently intimated to be the reader as

[33] According to David Lodge, this skeptical attitude to the concept of "the author" is in some measure a defensive or even self-conscious reaction to contemporary theory. Lodge writes, **"**The foregrounding of the act of authorship within the boundaries of the text, which is such a common

well, inserting a second-person "you" into the narration in a direct act of implication.[34] All of these breaks in perspective and identity, as Alan Wilde argues, lead to an uncanny naturalization of difference:

> No longer poised juridically above the world he surveys, the postmodern ironist is, typically, involved *in*, though not necessarily *with*, that world: a part of, even though he may be apart from the other objects in, his own perceptual field. . . . The symmetry of modernist disorder gives way to the apparent randomness of simple contiguity; omniscience of understanding to an indecision about the very meanings and relations of things . . . to an attitude that takes for granted, more, naturalizes, the abyss as one constituent among others of the new, prolific, and dumb reality. ("Barthelme Unfair to Kierkegaard: Some Thoughts on Modern and Postmodern Irony" 47-48)

This high ironic problematizing of identity transforms the passive, voyeuristic bondage of low irony into an aggressive form of high ironic performativity. Likewise, the existential frustration witnessed by the low ironic protagonist (e.g., Camus's Meursault, Dostoyevsky's underground man, Hemingway's Jake Barnes, et al.) in high irony is attended by the (reader's) experiential frustration which obtains in the removal of the stable referentiality that once radiated from the linear, causal, chronological rationality of static narration.[35]

As Raymond Federman writes in *Surfiction: Fiction Now…and Tomorrow*,

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feature of contemporary fiction, is a defensive response, either conscious or intuitive, to the questioning of the idea of the author and of the mimetic function of fiction by modern critical theory." See Lodge, "The Novel Now: Theories and Practices," 133.

[34] This technique of the "engaging narrator," having had notable use during the 19th century in the works of such writers as Balzac, Carroll, Dickens, Dostoyevsky, and Hawthorne (to name but a few), in contemporary metafiction is used less as a rhetorical aside than as a direct insertion of the reader into the narrative. For a more extensive analysis, see Warhol, "Toward a Theory of the Engaging Narrator," 811-18.

[35] Alain Robbe-Grillet comes to a similar conclusion in his essay, "On Several Obsolete Notions," stating that: "All the technical elements of the narrative – systematic use of the past tense and the third person unconditional, adoption of chronological development, linear plots, regular trajectory of the passions, impulse of each episode toward a conclusion, etc. – everything tended to impose the image of a stable, coherent, continuous, unequivocal, entirely decipherable universe. Since the intelligibility of the world was not even questioned, to tell the story did not raise a problem. The style of the novel could be innocent." See Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel,* 32.

once a certain doubt is cast upon the authority of the text (i.e., the singular intentionality of the author), it becomes the reader's task to align correspondences within the narrative itself and come up with a personal means of constructing and verifying his or her own systems of interpretation:

> . . . no longer being manipulated by an authorial point of view, the reader will be the one who extracts, invents, creates a meaning and an order for the people in the fiction. And it is this total participation in the creation which will give the reader a sense of having created a meaning and not having simply received, passively, a neatly prearranged meaning. (*Surfiction* 14)

This "total participation" in the semi-private manufacture of meaning is of critical importance during the reader's interactions within this advanced mode of high irony; a mode of irony which straddles the line between mythical ontology and nonfictional epistemology, and exists within a literature that deals less in fiction *per se* than in fictionalization, in the replication of replicas (Barth's *regressus in infinitum*),[36] and in literary events that engender extraordinary doubt.

According to Richard Pearce's assessment in "Enter the Frame," this radically new mode of fiction (which Pearce, following Federman, refers to as "surfiction") has developed as a direct result of these changes in perspective. In this new fiction, the rules of the literary game become blurred, the traditionally static roles of author, text, and reader are shuffled, and everything appears to issue forth from the fictional mind of the narrator. As Pearce writes:

> The narrator is no longer situated between the subject and the reader, he no longer stands on a fixed vantage, and he no longer encloses the subject within the frame of his visual imagination. Indeed, as he enters

[36] In "Life-Story" from *Lost in the Funhouse*, Barth writes: "Another story about a writer writing a story! Another *regressus in infinitum*! Who doesn't prefer art that at least overtly imitates something other than its own processes? That doesn't continually proclaim 'Don't forget I'm an artifice'? That takes for granted its mimetic nature instead of asserting it in order (not so slyly after all) to deny it, or vice-versa?" See Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse*, 117.

> the frame, the medium asserts itself as an independent source of interest and control. ("Enter the Frame" 48)

As the narrator is placed at critical distance from the narrative itself, the standard omniscience of the narrative voice is replaced by a narrator that is no longer reliable, that frequently changes the direction of the narrative, and is even heard to argue with (or brutally harangue) the characters of the story, the reader, and the "real" author. The result of this change in narration, Pearce states, is that:

> . . . what the reader sees is no longer a clear picture contained within the narrator's purview, but an erratic image where the narrator, the subject, and the medium are brought into the same imaginative field of interaction, an image that is shattered, confused, self-contradictory but with an independent and individual life of its own. ("Enter the Frame" 48)

And as narrator, subject, and medium are brought together under the unified heading of a more complete, more authentically fictitious reading experience, this newly liberated narrator expands into a whole cocktail of new roles: meta-character, pseudo-author, pseudo-reader, intrusive interlocutor, reading companion, and on and on.

This expanded narrator even seems to have the capacity to merge into the text itself, disappearing between the lines like Barth's Polyeidus, popping in and out of the word world, as Patricia Waugh puts it, through a playful act of "self-begetting" (14). This is possible, Waugh argues, because, "To make a statement in fiction is to make a character" (92). Indeed, in Waugh's analysis, statement and character are fused to the extent that, "statements have 'meaning' in relation to the context in

which they are uttered," and in fiction, "statement is the character in context" (92).[37] Waugh continues:

> Thus characters in metafiction may explicitly dissolve into statements. They may act in ways totally deviant in terms of the logic of the everyday 'commonsense' world, but perfectly normal within the logic of the fictional world of which they are a part. They may travel in time, die and carry on living, murder their authors or have affairs with them. Some may read about the story of their lives or write the books in which they appear. Sometimes they know what is going to happen to them and attempt to prevent it. (*Metafiction,* 92-93)[38]

As the narrator crosses the ontological divide between the fictional and the "real," the narrator no longer serves the function of integrating these two opposed and yet contingent worlds, but rather works to problematize delineation, according to Waugh, "by commenting not on the *content* of the story but on the act of narration itself, on the *construction* of the story" (131). This fracturing of the narrator's steady remove from the narrative world shifts the narrative focus from the content to the context, as Linda Hutcheon also observes, "by either making the 'narration' into the very substance of the novel's content, or by undermining the traditional coherence of the 'fiction' itself" (*Narcissistic Narrative* 28). This dissertation ventures that the high ironic metafiction of the early postmodern period engages in this revisionary process in order to gain critical access to the ideological substance concealed beneath traditional systems of coherence and within the structural content of narrative.

Through an expanded narratorial agency made possible via radical shifts in narratorial perspective, voice, and idiom, and through a metafictional focus on

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[37] Hutcheon makes a similar claim: "The voice of the narrator is not an exterior authenticating authorial one; it is the voice of a character." See Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative,* 63.

[38] Narrators of this variety often populate the biographies of imaginary writers such as in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), Alan Friedman's *Hermaphrodeity* (1972), and Stephen Millhauser's *Edwin Mullhouse* (1972); and effectively run the show in metafictional, pseudo-autobiographical reflections such as Ronald Sukenick's *Up* (1970), Steve Katz's *The Exaggerations of Peter Prince* (1968), and sections of John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968). See also McCaffery in Currie, *Metafiction*, 183.

narrative structure that transforms its parodic source material into a self-reflexive matrix of manipulable metaphors, figures, and tropes, narrative within the high ironic mode foregrounds its own fictional status and expands the scope of the fictional to include all linguistic constructs, speech acts, and narrative events. In so doing, the artificial structure of the text is revealed to the reader and the critical implications of this self-reflexive critique, thereby, expanded beyond the content of the work to also include the relationship of this content to the socio-cultural context surrounding and informing the metaphors, figures, and tropes employed in the narrative. This critical function designates metafiction as an ideal means of deconstructing the structures that make narrative so useful as an ideological delivery device. As discussed in the next chapter, it is precisely this critical function that sets high ironic metafiction apart and makes it such a powerful means of literary subversion.

CHAPTER TWO

FROM THE PSEUDO-SACRED TO THE PSEUDO-HISTORICAL: A TYPOLOGICAL APPROACH TO THE ANALYSIS OF METAFICTION

> Tale is the underbelly of myth. Myth is head, tale body; myth power, tale resistance; myth nice, tale naughty; myth structure, tale flow; myth king, tale fool; myth sacred, tale profane; myth father, tale child (though the child, as always, is the father's father); myth tragic, tale comic. Myths are communal dreamlike fantasies (Freud's "daydream of the race"); tales are more about a person's waking life. Where animals talk, magic abounds, and revenge is sweet.
>
> --- Robert Coover, "Tale, Myth, Writer" in *Brothers and Beasts,* 2007

Semiotic Trajectories and Narrative Tendencies

The above epigraph is significant in a number of ways. It is a reminder of the intimately intertwined nature of structure and ideology, paradigm and dogma, within the realm of the mythopoeic. It is a reminder that culture (in all of its socio-political incarnations, traditions, anxieties, crises, and mechanisms of power) will always play a definitive role in the proliferation and interpretation of narrative. It is also a reminder that, although myth and (fairy) tale pull in opposite directions, they are inseparably connected to one another as the divergent poles of a common axis — tale straining violently toward the zero-point of experience, myth pressing outward and away from experience, toward the very limits of human comprehension.

This dual mythopoeic spectrum also assists in clarifying the semiotic relationships between the various zones of narrative discourse as introduced in the previous chapter. For, as the following diagram illustrates, there is a significant correspondence between the tendencies and semiotic characteristics of each of these

zones of narrative discourse; each containing its own binary narrative spectrum of centripetal and centrifugal currents (see figure 2).

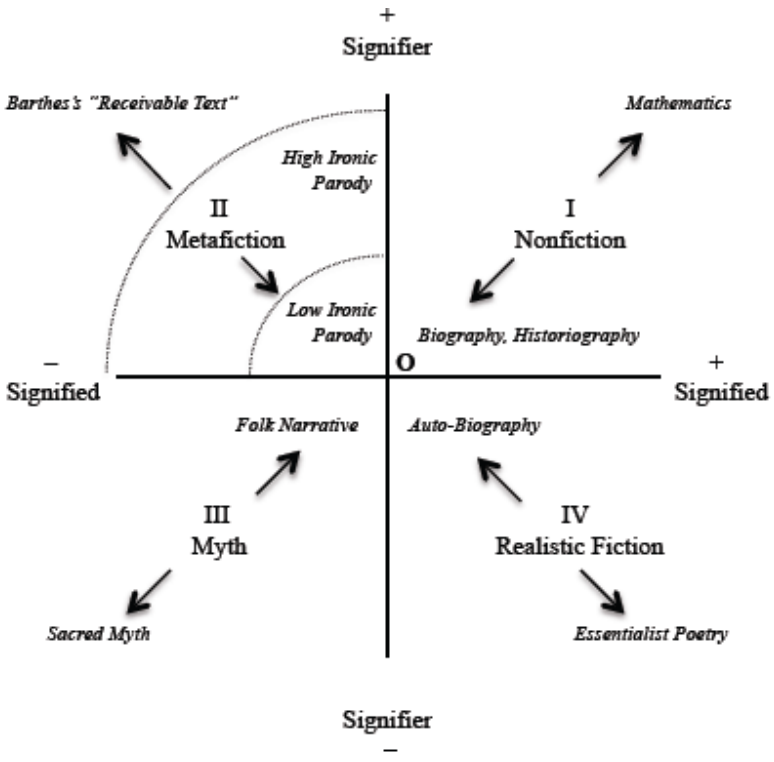

Figure 2. Diagram illustrating the four zones of narrative discourse and their respective centripetal and centrifugal tendencies.

As illustrated in the diagram above, each of the four zones of narrative discourse contains a central spectrum that describes both an inward and an outward tendency. Depending on the semiotic characteristics of a given narrative, this tendency indicates either a centripetal movement towards the zero-point of experience or a centrifugal movement away from the zero-point towards a more extreme manifestation of the zone's semiotic function (i.e., nonfiction [I] *S*+*s*+; metafiction [II] *S*+*s*-; myth [III] *S*-*s*-; realistic fiction [IV] *S*-*s*+). As described in the previous chapter, each of these zones contains either a dominant centrifugal or centripetal

movement, however, the presence of this dominant tendency in no way precludes the construction of texts that indicate a counter movement. As cultures, popular tastes, and dominant theoretical paradigms change, this counter movement can even affect such an influence on narrative discourse that a new dominant takes precedence. This shift in dominance may, in fact, be currently taking place within the zone of nonfiction (I).

The zone of nonfiction (I) contains two distinct tendencies. One is a centrifugal movement that tends towards the pure abstraction of mathematical discourse, where token and referent, signified and signifier (word and world) are managed into a rigorous, conventional agreement (Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* [1921] might be taken as an archetypal example of this centrifugal trend). Moving in the opposite direction is the centripetal tendency of this narrative spectrum. This movement tends toward a more experiential type of signification, one that is less abstract, less conceptually fixed, but no less rigorous in its projection of epistemological solidity. As such, the inner end of the nonfiction spectrum is most often the location of biographical and historiographical types of narrative — systematic articulations of the world that offer an ordered, logical, if not completely technical interpretation of experience; narrative that tends toward the precision of scientific method in its assignment of meaning (hence the centrifugal dominance).

Over the course of the 20th century and well into the 21st there has been a discernable trend towards the inner end of this nonfictional spectrum. This trend clearly reflects a growing scepticism towards grand, totalizing generalizations of society, culture and human nature. Among other things, this scepticism has led to a radical re-thinking of Enlightenment theories regarding the stadial structure of

history and the influences of causality, contingency, agency and temporality. But perhaps most importantly, this scepticism has called for a critical re-appraisal of the narrative structure of history itself. Concurrent with this scepticism, this period has also seen a steady increase in academic as well as popular interest in the anthropological, psychological, and sociological historiographies of the minority subject, the subcultural and countercultural subject, and the subject at the social periphery. This change in cultural emphasis not only indicates a shift away from the dominant centrifugal tendency of the "master narrative" and/or the controlling "metanarrative" (as identified and defined by Fredric Jameson, J. F. Lyotard, and Hayden White), it also reflects a greater interest in "microhistories" (as defined by historians such as Georg G. Iggers, Giovanni Levi, and Carlo Ginzberg)[39] and the analysis of the singular event and the singular individual. These new developments in epistemology, historiography, and the theory of history have problematized nonfictional claims to facticity and historicity, drawing this zone of discourse all the more into the realm of narratological and semiotic enquiry. This shift in emphasis also suggests that a new centripetal dominant may well be in the process of establishing itself. This inward tendency, as will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter, is also significant for its movement of the dominant area of nonfictional discourse ever closer to the zone of myth (III) and the blending of "historical" legend and cultural lore that occurs on the centripetal end of its spectrum.

Indeed, one of the points argued in this chapter is that, although myth (III) and nonfiction (I) are directly opposed zones of narrative discourse (myth pulling

[39] See Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*, London: Wesleyan UP, 1997. See also Levi, "On Microhistory," 93-113; and Ginzburg, "Microhistory, Two or Three Things That I Know about It", 93-214.

away from the event of experience towards the ontological *groundless*ness of the indescribable and nonfiction pulling away towards the epistemological *grounded*ness of scientific observation and precise description), these zones of discourse are in no way disconnected. While their courses run in opposite directions, these zones of discourse mirror each other in a number of interesting ways, and, like the correspondences between legend and history, the sublime infinity of the divine and the sublime infinity of quantum physics, these methods of discourse both relate to a common, unifying impulse, though myth finds it in utopianism (unified natural being) and nonfiction in empiricism (unified natural law).

Traditionally the arbitration of this interaction has fallen to the discourse of realistic fiction (IV). Borrowing elements from both myth and nonfiction, realistic fiction proposes a subjective means of interpreting experience via the mimetic projection of a world that claims and/or pretends to accurately "reflect" reality. This zone of narrative discourse primarily describes a centrifugal movement away from the zero-point of experience towards a semiotic grounding that privileges a singular perspective and/or a singular definition of the relation of word and world (i.e., a grounding that places specific emphasis on detailed characterization, the aesthetics of style, and the lexis of the subjective "lens" of reflection; George Eliot's *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* might be taken as a narrative archetype for this singular perspective). In direct opposition to the withdrawal from the linguistic signified that takes place within the zone of metafiction (II), the spectrum of realistic fiction indicates a movement towards the concrete, referential, phenomenological signified and away from the abstract verbal representation and the linguistic multiplicity of the signifier. However, as in each of the respective zones of narrative

discourse, realistic fiction displays two distinct trajectories. The inward movement of the spectrum of realistic fiction is more clearly experiential and tends toward directly autobiographical forms of narrative such as the diary and the memoir, whereas the outward end of this spectrum, describing the dominant centrifugal pull, indicates a movement toward the signified that typically places emphasis upon the narrative's fundamental, mimetic nature as a poetic instantiation of reality.

In opposition to the mimetic discourse of realistic fiction, the zone of metafiction (II) contains a spectrum that, on the outer end, tends toward the utterly nonsensical, purely absurd silence of the "receivable." Similar to the breakdown of language at the esoteric fringes of the spectrum of myth, at its centrifugal extreme, discourse within the zone of metafiction manifests itself as a complete dissolution of the signified aspect of the narrative and its replacement with a purely linguistic, infinitely self-referential collection of signifiers. The inward movement of the metafictional spectrum, however, like the inward movement in each of the zones of narrative discourse, is more toward the immediate experiential relation of the phonological and the phenomenological, or, in other words, denotes a movement towards the actual "event" of experience. As such, the inner end of the metafictional spectrum marks a distinct tendency towards a return to the zone of realistic fiction (IV). This tendency, as described later in this chapter, explains the shift in power of action as the narrative mode descends from the middle point of the zone of metafiction, occupied by the high ironic mode, toward the more experiential mode of the low ironic. While both narrative modes are characterized by their application of the distinctly metafictional mechanism of parody, the self-reflexivity of the low ironic is significantly less than that of the high ironic. And as the high ironic mode of

narrative expands toward the centrifugal end of the spectrum, it not only increases discernably in its distance from the zero-point of experience, the extremity of its self-reflexivity also increases, requiring it to draw all the more on the forms and source materials of its neighbouring zones of narrative discourse, namely myth (III) and nonfiction (I).

However, instead of arbitrating the terms by which myth and nonfiction relate to the world by backgrounding the linguistic nature of narrative (as is typical of narrative within the zone of realistic fiction), the metafictional project foregrounds its linguistic forms and structures and proposes a purely fictional means of relating to the inherently textual, always already semiotically encoded experience of the world. As such, the mode of high ironic narrative, which serves as the central mode of the zone of metafiction, is notable for its movement away from the kind of detailed characterisation and stylistic/lexical mechanisms of mimetic illusion that define realistic fiction and more toward an emphasis upon the act of narration that pronounces its fictional, contingent nature as an intertext among intertexts, or, as is often the case, an intertext *about* intertexts. And in place of the smooth melding of mythopoesis and historiography that occurs in realistic fiction, in metafiction there is instead the development of a highly volatile parodic friction that tends toward textual fragmentation, multiplicity, and indeterminate transideological self-critique.

It is precisely high ironic metafiction's parodic manipulation of mythical and historiographic source materials that this chapter proposes to explore. By first defining the narrative characteristics of the spectrum of myth (III) and delineating the in-built subversive mechanism of mythopoesis from the parodic mechanism of high ironic metafiction, this chapter then compares this parodic mechanism with the types

of intertextual critique present in other narrative modes such as contemporary (postmodern) mythopoesis and low ironic parody. Following this comparison, the focus of this chapter then shifts to an analysis of high ironic metafiction's parodic approach to nonfictional and historiographical forms of narrative. This chapter argues that not only does high ironic narrative take a radically disruptive approach to both mythical and nonfictional forms, but more importantly, it also critically responds to the ideological content of these forms. It is the subversive, transideological nature of this critical response that defines metafiction as a zone of narrative discourse and places the high ironic as a mode within this zone. By establishing the characteristics of this response and its central importance to metafictional narrative (as an inherently parodic process), it is possible to better understand the ways in which metafiction communicates with other zones of discourse and the subversive nature of that communication.

Charting the Mode of Myth

Primary to an understanding of the parodic processes that occur within the high ironic mode is the location of the structural forms and ideological devices of the source material being parodied. Therefore, this analysis will begin with an in-depth examination of the spectrum of narrative discourse that occurs within the zone of myth (III) before exploring its wider ramifications and influences.

As illustrated in the diagram above, there is a wide spectrum of semiotic variation within the zone of myth (III). This spectrum encompasses two distinct yet interconnected tendencies. On the interior end of the spectrum there is the pull of the fairy tale narrative back toward the zero-point of experience and a tendency toward

the reification of foregrounded exoteric signification (or, in other words, the iterative moment or "event" of experience within an historiographically specified time and space). And the outer end of the mythopoeic spectrum describes a movement away from such experiential and/or linguistic foregrounding and a tendency towards the sacred mystery of the timeless, space-less esoteric.[40] This is the outer edge of poetics where, as Lévi-Strauss argues in "The Structural Study of Myth," meaning disengages with and transcends language; the point at which, "There is no logic, no continuity. Any characteristic can be attributed to any object; every conceivable relation can be found. . . . [and] everything becomes possible" (429).

However, although the sacred, esoteric myth pulls the reader in an opposite direction from that of the fairy tale, it would be misleading to believe that they are in any way disconnected. As Mircea Eliade argues in *Myth and Reality,* they are actually more intimately related than might be readily apparent. Eliade contends that while the tale is often profane (especially in comparison to the mysterious, "pure presence" of religious myth), this does not indicate an absence of the sacred or a "desacralization" of the text (191). Rather, the sacred mythic content of the tale operates covertly, or, as Eliade maintains, it is "camouflaged" (200).[41] According to Eliade, under the cover of this metaphorical "camouflage," myth continues to exert

[40] As Zavarzadeh indicates in "The Semiotics of the Foreseen": "The complete opposite of the type of narrative in which both the signified and the signifier are foregrounded [i.e., zone I] is the one in which both are concealed or backgrounded, the fictions of zone III. These narratives claim to be situated not in the common 'reality' of this world but in a higher transcendental reality, the ultimate site of Truth, and present themselves as essentially un-written narratives - narratives that are pure presence, unmediated by such worldly practices as 'writing' and inscription." See Zavarzadeh, "The Semiotics of the Foreseen," 619-20.

[41] Jack Zipes also gives some space to the analysis of Eliade's concept of "camouflage"; see Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth: Myth as Fairy Tale*, 1-4.

its transcendent influence on the reader.[42] In fact, Eliade proposes, the narrative mechanism of the fairy tale may well have developed (perhaps at an incredibly early stage) as an "easy doublet" for the initiation myth and rites, becoming, in a sense, a popular or secularized version of the myth in the common vernacular (202). This popular version, Eliade argues, essentially serves the purpose of "re-creating the 'initiatory ordeals' on the plane of imagination and dream" (202).[43] According to Eliade's analysis:

> The tale takes up and continues 'initiation' on the level of the imaginary. If it represents an amusement or an escape, it does so only for the banalized consciousness, and particularly for that of the modern man; in the deep psyche initiation scenarios preserve their seriousness and continue to transmit their message, to produce mutations. All unwittingly, and indeed believing that he is merely amusing himself or escaping, the man of the modern societies still benefits from the imaginary initiation supplied by tales. (202)

While this form of amusing "imaginary initiation" is praised as beneficial by Eliade and is even seen as performing an essential role in the balanced development of the healthy psyche by writers and theorists such as G. K. Chesterton, Bruno Bettelheim, and David Elkind,[44] others such as Friedmar Apel and Christian Zimmer are more reticent in their appraisal of this type of mythical amusement.

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[42] In *No Souvenirs,* Eliade writes: "When something sacred manifests itself (hierophany), at the same time something 'occults' itself, becomes cryptic. Therein is the true dialectic of the sacred: by the mere fact of *showing* itself, the sacred *hides itself."* See Eliade, *No Souvenirs: Journal, 1957-1969*, 268.

[43] This initiatory concept is also echoed and developed in the works of Max Lüthi and N. J. Girardot. See Lüthi, *Once Upon a Time: On the Nature of Fairy Tales*, 59-60; Girardot, "Initiation and Meaning in the Tale of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," 274-300.

[44] See Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles,* 50-53; Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, 23; Elkind, *Miseducation: Preschoolers at Risk* (New York: Knopf, 1987). See also Temple, C., Martinez, M., Yokota, J. and Taylor A., *Children's Books in Children's Hands*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2002.

Indeed, it is precisely this type of banalized, mythical amusement that Friedmar Apel warns against in his *Die Zaubergärten der Phantasie*. Directly refuting Eliade's claims, Apel writes:

> [More contemporary] endeavours to portray the marvellous with the traditional means of fairy tale and other fantastic stories only serve to amuse the imagination and can no longer fulfil the old functions of conveying a sublime interpretation of life and a way of putting the meaning into practice. (273)[45]

Apel qualifies this stance by comparing the unifying function of the fairy tale to the narrative function of other genres such as the novel and lyric poetry. Apel argues that, whereas other genres are capable of relativizing and/or negating any sense of the possible unity of the world and the soul (without compromising the integrity of the genre), "the fairy tale requires the possibility of conceptualizing this unity as a starting point, no matter how relativized it becomes" (272). As this sincere sense of unity loses its plausibility, and 19th century innocence recedes into 20th century pragmatism, Apel claims, the fairy tale degenerates into "entertainment literature by feigning harmony and thus losing all connection to actual life" (273). This loss of the connective "folk" aspect of folklore, compounded with what he sees as the fairy tale's naïve disregard of fundamental shifts in human perception (especially in relation to the contextual and ontological changes inherent in the shift from the romantic to the modern to the postmodern), Apel argues, is its own indictment.

Zimmer, on the other hand, finds the danger of this type of imaginary amusement not in its ontological emptiness, but precisely in its very nature as an ontological device. In *Cinema et politique*, Zimmer writes:

> [Ideology's] supreme ruse is to delimit a kind of preserved sector, which it has named diversion [*divertissement*] and which it has cut off

[45] See Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth*, 140.

> from reality by decree – always *menaced*, as such, by subversion – and where it moves so comfortably that all the disguises it assumes have the double alibi of innocence and concern for the general good (moreover it plays between two worlds: that of everyday life and that of forgetting the everyday through dreams and imagination). Diversion is a *direct* creation of ideology. There is always potential alienation. To be diverted is to be disarmed. (138, Zimmer's emphasis, my translation)[46]

Thus disarmed and "diverted" (in the sense of being both entertained and distracted), Zimmer clearly indicates, the audience becomes at once a creative accomplice in the consumption and reproduction of ideology and also an agent of its continuous proliferation. In this way the passive audience becomes an unwittingly active participant in the expansion of a system of ideological programming. What Zimmer finds especially insidious about this deceptively innocent form of ideological transmission is its implicit manipulation of the imagination and the unconscious mind. Though Zimmer clearly agrees with Eliade regarding the serious nature of the messages being transmitted and the tremendous, mutative influence this type of activity has upon the audience, Zimmer is considerably more suspicious of the potential benefits of such an activity.[47]

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[46] Christian Zimmer, *Cinema et politique*. Paris: Seghers, 1974: "[Le] ruse suprême [de idéologie], de delimiter une espèce de secteur préservé, qu'elle a nommé *divertissement*, qu'elle a, par décret, coupé du reel – et où elle se meut d'autant plus à l'aise que tous les déguisements qu'elle y revêt ont le double alibi de l'innocence se du bien général (elle joue en plus sur les deux tableaux: celui de la vie quotidienne et celui de l'oubli de quotidien du rêve, de l'imaginaire). Le divertissement est ainsi une création *direct* de l'idéologie. Il est donc toujours alienation en puissance. Se diverter, c'est se désarmer." See Zimmer, *Cinema et politique,* 138. See also Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civiliation*, 34-35.

[47] It is worth noting here that, while Eliade's mythical "camouflage" hides the sacred beneath the secular, and Zimmer's "diversion" hides the ideological beneath the entertaining, Lévi-Strauss triangulates these terms via his assessment of the unique temporality of mythical constructs and their contemporary place within politics. As Lévi-Strauss writes in "The Structural Study of Myth": ". . . a myth always refers to events alleged to have taken place long ago. But what gives myth an operational value is that the specific pattern described is timeless; it explains the present and the past as well as the future. This can be made clear through a comparison between myth and what appears to have largely replaced it in modern societies, namely, politics." See Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth, 430.

It is precisely this type of suspicion that has informed the postmodern re-appraisal of the mode of myth as an ontological repository and the fairy tale as an ideological delivery device. On a sociological level this postmodern re-appraisal is a timely and very necessary reminder that the initiatory function of the fairy tale narrative continues to play an active role in the normatization, dissemination, and regulation of socio-political modes of thought and behaviour. However, as Zimmer points out in the passage above, within this constantly mutating process of socio-political initiation is also the constant possibility of subversion (138).

These ideological structures are always threatened by subversion due to the fact that they are, to a significant degree, predicated upon: 1) the transformative and/or subversive opposition to some type or set of socio-political paradigms (e.g., arbitrary tyranny, matriarchal hierarchy, Pagan cosmology, etc.) and 2) the simultaneous installation and/or affirmation of an another type or set (e.g., democratic government, patriarchal hierarchy, Christian cosmology, etc.). As Cristina Bacchilega observes in *Postmodern Fairy Tales*:

> As folk and fairy tale, the tale of magic produces wonder precisely through its seductively concealed exploitation of the conflict between its *normative* function, which capitalizes on the comforts of consensus, and its *subversive* wonder, which magnifies the powers of transformation. (7; Bacchilega's emphasis)

In other words, each new innovation subverts the previous structuring and prescribes an alternative version of the world and/or an alternative socio-political approach to the structuring of the world.

Following a more or less traditional pattern of subversive innovation, contemporary writers have continued to revise the fairy tale canon to more accurately

reflect the changing perspectives and politics of the 20th and the 21st centuries.[48] Widespread changes in social attitudes towards gender and sexual relations — especially following the various women's liberation movements of 1960s and 1970s — are reflected in narratives that reverse and/or undermine the stability of patriarchal gender-role assignments.[49] Likewise, anthropocentric approaches to the fairy tale have also undergone significant redesign in recent years. No more is the woodland necessarily considered a place of darkness and dread; increased ecological awareness has moved this anxiety toward the spread of urbanization, deforestation, and pollution.[50] Contemporary re-tellings sensitive to this environmentalism are more likely to celebrate animalism, bio-diversity, and the delicate interconnectedness of biological systems.[51] Furthermore, socio-economic factors such as class, wealth, and aristocratic status have also seen major revision. Monetary wealth and symbols of hierarchical status (such as titles, privileged hereditary rights, and other familial connections to positions of power) are no longer automatically linked to any positive or even desirable set of characteristics. As such, the postmodern fairy tale king, for example, cannot claim superiority simply on the basis of his social status, but must prove the relative worth of his character through his words and deeds.[52]

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[48] Though this is not a new or even novel thesis, it finds articulate expression in Maria Tatar's introduction to *The Classic Fairy Tales,* ix-xviii; see also Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth*, 139-161.

[49] For a comprehensive selection of feminist fairy tale "renovations" and critical literature, see Jack Zipes, *Don't Bet on the Prince,* Aldershot: Gower, 1986; see also Claire L. Malarte-Feldman, "Adaptation," in *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales*, 2-3.

[50] This type of eco-political revision even extends into the area role-reversal such as in Jon Scieszka's *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs* (1989) and Eugene Trivizas's *The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig* (1993).

[51] See, for example, Garner's "Little Red Riding Hood," in which the wolf is embraced and the woodcutter executed for his own crimes of ignorant violence. James Finn Garner, *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories*, 1-4.

[52] See Garner's "The Emperor's New Clothes," in *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories,* 5-8; see also Carter's "The Donkey Prince," in Zipes, *Don't Bet on the Prince,* 62-72.

While the fairy tales that emerge from this on-going (timeless?) revisionary process certainly exert a new socio-political influence upon the reader, it is important to locate these modified narratives within the mode of myth and to view their "postmodern" status merely as a periodizing marker. Furthermore, as the next section of this chapter will demonstrate, it is crucial that the metafictional treatment of myth and fairy tale be considered apart from—and a direct, critical response to—this essentially traditional method of mythopoeic contemporization.

Among the many contemporary authors who have engaged in this type of revisionary process might be counted writers such as Margaret Atwood, A. S. Byatt, Italo Calvino, Angela Carter, Roald Dahl, Samuel R. Delany, James Finn Garner, Anne Sexton, James Thurber and Jane Yolen (to name but a few); each, in his or her own way, transforming mythopoesis to better serve the psychological and initiatory needs of their postmodern readers and, thereby, directly influencing the course of mythopoeic development (not to mention its critical reception and continued dissemination). However, while it might be a fairly safe generalization to place the magic tales of these writers within the tradition of mythopoeic contemporization and categorize the magic tales of Kathy Acker, John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, and Ishmael Reed more within the metafictional realm of the postmodern, such a dichotomy would not be of much use in defining the characteristics and formal attributes of either of these closely related areas of literature. Furthermore, such a generalization would ignore the fact that the majority of the writers listed above have published works belonging, variously, to both of these literary traditions. Equally dangerous would be acquiescence to the course charted by folklorists such as Jack Zipes, who seem to view the trajectory of the magic tale as running through the

17th, 18th, and 19th century tales revised and embellished by H. C. Anderson, Giambattista Basile, Carlo Collodi, Charles Perrault, and the Grimm brothers straight into such 20th century re-visions as Anne Sexton's *Transformations* (1971), Olga Broumas's *Beginning with O* (1977), Jane Yolen's *Sleeping Ugly* (1981), and Martin Waddell's *The Tough Princess* (1986) — to repeat some of the postmodern fairy tale titles cited by Zipes.[53]

And yet, despite the postmodern "anti-mythic" tendency recognized by Zipes, the "demythologising" professed by Angela Carter and Robert Coover, and the inherently subversive condition of "re-tellings, re-evaluations, and re-figurings" acknowledged by Bacchilega, the writers listed above are often too easily fit into the area of postmodern mythopoesis without any significant acknowledgement of the fundamental differences in form and narration that set the works of these authors—as well as the discrete realms of myth and metafiction—apart.[54]

Adding to the already muddied waters of contemporary fairy tale theory, recent critical analyses by Catriona McAra, David Calvin, and Anna Kérchy have done little to clarify these issues. And instead of making the differences between myth and metafiction more apparent, these critics typically conflate and/or equate the latter with the former, often portraying metafiction as merely one feature of the "reverse discourse" occurring within the contemporary fairy tale genre (McAra and Calvin 3). In *Anti-Tales: The Uses of Disenchantment*, McAra and Calvin even go so

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[53] Acccording to the method followed by Zipes this list might also be expanded to include Barthelme's *Snow White* (1965]), John Gardner's *Grendel* (1971), Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), Atwood's *Bluebeard's Egg* (1983), James Finn Garner's *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories* (1994), as well as Coover's *Briar Rose* (1996), *Stepmother* [2004], and *A Child Again* (2005). See Jack Zipes, *The Brothers Grimm: From Enchanted Forests to the Modern World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002): 215-18.

[54] See Zipes *The Brothers Grimm,* 209, 216; Carter "Notes from the Front Line," 71; Coover, *Pricksongs and Descants,* 61; Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales,* 24.

far as to claim the prevalence of metafictional re-inventions and postmodern fairy tale adaptations as indicative of an expansion of the mythic into the anti-mythic — the classic fairy tale, subversively re-worked, emerging as the "anti-fairy tale" (3). Following similar assertions by Wolfgang Mieder and Aidan Day,[55] McAra and Calvin present "the anti-fairy tale and its source form as two sides of the same coin" (3). McAra and Calvin then proceed to typologically define this "anti-fairy tale" through a list of characteristic reversals, opposites, and contradictory traits that directly link the source form (i.e., the "classic" fairy tale) to its derivative inverse form (see figure 3).

Fairy Tale	**Anti-Fairy Tale**
- Optimism	- Pessimism
- Teleological, anticipatory	- Retrospective, subversive
- "Once upon a time"	- Real-world context
- Initiation	- Dissonance
- Pedagogical	- Lessons unlearnt
- Infantalised, bowdlerized	- Adult themes, cynicism
- Telling	- Untelling
- Cultural mirror	- Breaking the mirror
- Parabolic	- Anti-parabolic
- Black and white morality	- Grey morality or amorality
- Fixed point of view	- Shifting perspectives
- Independent narrative	- Intertextual, metafictional
- Bourgeois	- Avant-garde
- Patriarchal	- Feminist
- Mythologises	- Demythologises
- Enchantment	- Disenchantment

Figure 3. Catriona McAra and David Calvin, eds., *Anti-Tales: The Uses of Disenchantment* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2011): 3.

[55] See Aidan Day, *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass*, 132-33; and Mieder, "Anti-fairy tale," 50.

Although it must be conceded that, from a folklorist's perspective, such a typology offers a seductive means of categorization and assistance in the comparative analysis of mythopoeic forms and types, nevertheless, metafiction is too easily thrown into the mix without any account made for its fundamental differences in formal and narratorial structure.[56] Neither does the approach forwarded by McAra and Calvin adequately recognize the various roles of irony and parody in the reversal of source-form and anti-form. For example: while the dauntless, masculine hero of old is, indeed, often portrayed as a pathetic, chauvinist anti-hero in many postmodern adaptations — both mythopoeic and metafictional — there is a fundamental difference between having the socio-political tables turned on a character via a socio-politically aware external narrator (as is common in the mythopoeic works of Dahl, Garner, Sexton, and Thurber) versus having that same character become self-consciously aware of his anti-heroic nature and directly comment on it as an aspect of the overall narration (as common in the metafictional parodies of Barthelme, Coover, and Reed).[57]

Another problem avoided by this type of analysis is the fact that the act of subversion often leads to the establishment of an inverse ideology or characteristic by default — pessimism, feminism, and amorality not so much established positions *per se*, but rather the potential implications of an active subversion of optimism,

[56] This confusion over the best means of including metafiction into the context of folklore studies and narratological theory is also reflected in studies such as Jessica Tiffin's *Marvelous Geometry* (2009), in which Tiffin completely misrepresents the form of metafiction with its function. Tiffin writes: ". . . the unashamed presentation of the marvelous, as well as the unrealistic use of pattern and repetition in describing events, similarly draws attention to a nonrealist form of representation. . . . In this sense, then, fairy tale has some inherently metafictional elements" (23). See Jessica Tiffin, *Marvelous Geometry: Narrative and Metafiction in Modern Fairy Tale*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009.

[57] The subtleties of this narratorial dialectic and its relation to anti-heroic self-consciousness are played out in an interesting way in Coover's *Briar Rose* (1996). In Coover's tale, the fairy-godmother, the princess, and the hero are pitted against each other in a tense, complicated battle for primary narratorial agency.

patriarchy, and conventional morality (though this implied reversal can just as easily become the subject of ironic doubt or the doubt of doubt, such as occurs when the narrator's ironically self-consciousness irony begets a decidedly uncertain sense of sincerity).[58] Unfortunately, these narratological disparities are not taken into account by this "anti-fairy tale" typology, the inverted characteristics of which, otherwise, relate quite closely to several aspects of the pseudo-mythical and pseudo-historical parodic structures occurring within high ironic metafiction.

However, before moving this chapter's analysis toward the metafictional approach to nonfiction—the topic that concerns the latter portion of this chapter—it is necessary to locate and define the difference between the mythopoeic and the metafictional. As discussed above, it is not merely the *anti*-mythical reversal that sets the various applications and manipulations of mythical narrative forms at odds with metafiction. The *anti*- is always already present in the mythical matrix. So what exactly is it that places the metafictional, *pseudo*-mythical approach in a separate typological category?

[58] Carter's *American Ghosts & Old World Wonders* (1993), Garner's *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories* (1994), and Coover's *Stepmother* (2004) are replete with such doubly ironic situations, where being ironic about being ironic about being optimistic, for example, becomes, through a kind of rhetorical double-negative, an absurd return to optimism. From this perspective, the analysis forwarded by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), especially in the chapter entitled "Snow White and Her Wicked Stepmother," might also be read as a critique of pro-patriarchal authority via anti-matriarchal suppression (36-43) – patriarchy as anti-matriarchy – this dynamic is also supported by Maria Tatar's approach in *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales* (3-38). However, as Zipes points out, the ideology forwarded within any mythopoetic text will always present the case for the suppression of some type of "evil," whether it is the pagan subtext cleansed and re-tooled to suit the Grimms' own Christian dogma (Tatar 35-38) or the sexist metaphors deployed and ridiculed for comedic effect by Garner. That is how the fairy tale is capable of staying fresh, culturally resonant, and worth the effort of perpetually reproducing and exploiting as an ideological delivery device.

Response, Correspondence, and Core-Response

Although Anna Kérchy's study, *Postmodern Reinterpretations of Fairy Tales* (in many ways a parallel project to that of McAna and Calvin)[59] does not stray from the path already charted by Zipes, et al., it does, somewhat inadvertently, offer a direction out of this typological miasma. In the editorial preface to her 2011 collection, Kérchy writes, "Past and present, originals and rewrites, texts, intertexts and metatexts (co-)respond to each other . . ." (xvi). While this otherwise fairly orthodox claim may or may not be the case, the important question raised by such a statement (despite Kérchy's attempt to synthesize some kind of meta-semantic cohesion between the two) is whether *correspondence* and *response* should be linked without qualification. Does a similarity in form necessarily indicate a similarity in message? If so, would that not preclude and deny the mechanism of parody? In an attempt to answer these questions it should become apparent that the negotiation of this overlapping relationship is, perhaps, the most important location of the difference between the subversive *anti-* current of contemporary mythopoesis and the critically parodic, *pseudo*-mythical forms of metafiction.

It is precisely this space between correspondence and response that is neglected by the materialist *cum* historicist approach taken by Zipes when he states, as he does in *The Brothers Grimm*, "Each innovative retelling and rewriting of a well-known tale in the cultural heritage is an independent human act seeking to align

[59] Both of these projects evolved out of the debates and discussions initiated at the "Fairy Tale After Angela Carter" conference held at University of East Anglia in 2009 and continued at the "Anti-Tales: The Uses of Disenchantment" conference held at University of Glasgow in 2010. See Karin Kukkonen, review of *Postmodern Reinterpretations of Fairy Tales: How Applying New Methods Generates New Meanings*, 274; see also Defne Cizakca, review of *Anti-Tales: The Uses of Disenchantment,* item TKR7-13.

itself with the original utopian impulse of the first-told tale" (215).[60] Though this statement traces the same line of approach followed by Kérchy, the crucial connection is the point at which Kérchy's sense of correspondence/response aligns with what Zipes frames as the "original utopian impulse." This alignment seems to beg the introduction of an intermediary term, a utopian core to which a "core-response" could be said to relate, thereby delineating the formal correspondence of texts from the ideological (and/or transideological) response of texts. Applying this term to the folkloric approach taken by Zipes (a concept also supported by Eliade, Apel, and Zimmer, as seen previously), the original utopian impulse can be thought of as the definitive ontological core that links the myth to its mode.[61] This indicates that texts that formally relate to the mythopoeic can be said to correspond if a significant link can be established that demonstrates a common relationship to this mythopoeic core (frequently manifest through the formal appropriation of narrative elements or the repetition of certain aspects of a distinct narrative pattern, archetype, or central metaphor, such as that which links Basile's "Sun, Moon, and Talia" [1634] to Coover's *Briar Rose* [1996]). However, the definitive characteristic that locates a text either within or without the mode of myth is not this formal correspondence, but rather the text's reaction to this ontological core, its core-response, or, in other words, its capacity to reify or recuperate the "original utopian impulse."[62] When the core-response is one of utopian reification or recuperation (no matter how

[60] In his conception of an "original utopian impulse, Zipes is condensing and synthesizing similar statements made by Friedmar Apel and Michel Butor. See Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth*, 140, 142; Apel, *Die Zaubergärten*, 272-73; Michel Butor, "On Fairy Tales," 352.

[61] Zipes writes: "*The contemporary myth is not only an ideological message but also a fairy tale that cannot totally abandon its ancient utopian origins."* See Zipes*, The Brothers Grimm,* 215.

[62] It is important to note that, although presented in somewhat different terms (and even retracted at some points), this concept of "recuperation" was first introduced by Jack Zipes. See Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth*, 157-59.

stylistically revisionary and/or transideologically subversive), the narrative response is one that maintains the ontological core of myth—it both *corresponds to* and *responds as* a work of mythopoesis. However, when this utopianism and the ideologically loaded semiotic systems that support this utopianism become the subjects of profound transideological doubt, are rendered indeterminate, or are eschewed altogether, the narrative can no longer be said to conform to the mode of myth and must, therefore, be placed within a separate mode and typological category.

The reversal of the terms of this utopianism and other radical inversions of the ideologically loaded semiotic systems that support this utopianism (e.g., the shift from patriarchal authority [*à la* Perrault] to matriarchal authority, such as in Carter's *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, or the shift from anti-pagan Christian ideology [*à la* the Grimm brothers] to anti-Christian pagan ideology, such as in Sexton's *Transformations*) only act as demythologizing and/or disenchanting agents to the extent that they directly subvert such fallacious notions as the timeless totality of myth and the unchanging universality of the ideological messages being conveyed. The "myth" that these texts destroy — or, at least, do violence to — is not the mythopoeic mode of narrative, but the sense of myth in which, as Roland Barthes describes it, actual experience is "overturned" (*Image-Music-Text* 165).

During the myth-making process, Barthes states, society, culture, ideology, and history are stolen and replaced by a simulacrum or "reflection" of the natural world (*Image-Music-Text* 165; *Mythologies* 128-29, 131).[63] Barthes writes:

[63] In a reference to this same passage in *The Brothers Grimm*, Zipes writes: "Myth is a collective representation that is socially determined and then inverted so as not to appear as a cultural artifact." See Zipes, *The Brothers Grimm*, 209.

> This reflection . . . is *inverted*: myth consists in overturning culture into nature or, at least, the social, the cultural, the ideological, the historical into the "natural". What is nothing but a product of class division and its moral, cultural and aesthetic consequences is presented (stated) as being a "matter of course"; under the effect of mythical inversion, the quite contingent foundations of the utterance become Common Sense, Right Reason, the Norm, General Opinion, in short the *doxa* (which is the secular figure of the Origin). (*Image-Music-Text* 165, Barthes's emphasis)

It is this false, manipulated "reflection" that writers such as Carter and Coover see as dangerously deceptive. As Carter has maintained on several occasions, "I'm in the demythologizing business. I'm interested in myths . . . because they are extraordinary lies designed to make people unfree" (qtd. in Sage 79). In attempting to call myth's bluff, so to speak, and invert the already inverted in order to reveal the artificiality of the "natural" façade of this *doxa,* the demythologizing project is an effort to return to some kind of pre-mythical, regressive, or semiologically "retrospective" cultural space (to combine Barthes with McAna and Calvin).

This space, Barthes argues, exists beneath the surface of the mythologized sign, in the metaphorical workings and significations that make the rose something more than a red-petaled plant with thorns, the leaf motif something more than a quaint design flourish, and the cigar always more than just a cigar (*Mythologies* 113). However, apart from the purely synthetic, epistemological language of mathematics (which equates thing and world, signifier and signified, without adding any semiotic depth beyond the direct correlation of the arbitrary symbol to its abstract referent),[64] Barthes claims that it is only the "anti-language" of essentialist poetry that is ever

[64] "When the meaning is too full for myth to be able to invade it, myth goes around it, and carries it away bodily. This is what happens to mathematical language. In itself, it cannot be distorted, it has taken all possible precautions against *interpretation*: no parasitical signification can worm itself into it. And this is why, precisely, myth takes it away en bloc; it takes a certain formula ($E=mc^2$), and makes of this unalterable meaning the pure signifier of mathematicity. We can see that what is here robbed by myth is something which resists, something pure." See Barthes, *Mythologies*, 132.

successful in penetrating the semiotic surface and transforming the word back into the very thing itself, whereby meaning is restored to its natural quality (*Mythologies* 133).[65] And yet, as he is also quick to recognize, this refusal, this turning back to the essential quality of the word, this "[occupation of] a position which is the reverse of that of myth," is also its undoing; for, "by fiercely refusing myth, poetry surrenders to it bound hand and foot" (134). According to Barthes, this inadvertent surrender occurs because in reverting to the essence of the signified, the signifier is at once emptied and refreshed. Despite the poetic reversal being an attempt to return a measure of purity to the word, Barthes argues, the poetic word, in the final analysis, is only ever an addition to the history of its own usage and, therefore, a restoration of the first-order *language-object* from which myth parasitically derives its second-order *metalanguage* (134-35). Or, to put it another way, even in its most un-cooked, primitive state (like the raw material of the social, the cultural, the ideological, and the historical), language is always unavoidably at the mercy of mythical appropriation.

Even when this mechanism of mythical appropriation is exposed and twisted in new directions, as it is in the postmodern texts of writers such as Barthelme, Carter, and Coover, the demythologizing project differs greatly depending on the narrative forms, narratorial perspectives, and various core-responses of each text. Indeed, analysis reveals that even between these highly subversive, ironically allied writers there is little agreement between their respective approaches to the demythologizing project.

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[65] Barthes notes, in reference to Jean-Paul Sartre's *Saint-Genet: Actor and Martyr* (283): "We are again dealing here with *meaning*, in Sartre's use of the term, as a natural quality of things, situated outside a semiological system." See Barthes, *Mythologies*, 133 n.11.

A Comparative, Postmodern Reading of "Blackbeard"

Taking the Bluebeard tale type as a point of comparison, a number of interesting similarities and contrasts become apparent. Carter's "The Bloody Chamber," for example, reveals a very different core-response when compared to such parodic adaptations of the tale as Coover's "The Last One" and Barthelme's "Bluebeard." Likewise, Coover's low ironic treatment of the mythical material also leads to an alternative configuration of correspondence and response when compared to Barthelme's high ironic version of the tale. By tracing how each of these writers deals with the "Bluebeard" tale type, a useful comparison between the low and high ironic modes of narrative can be made and a more practical typological delineation between myth and metafiction can be established.

Throughout the tales collected in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979; hereafter *The Bloody Chamber*), Angela Carter engages in what has now become a familiar postmodern act of mythopoeic concretization. Like the darkly skewed, dubiously magical worlds of Barthelme and Coover, Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* transubstantiates a frighteningly real dreamworld. However, the tangible nature of Carter's dreamworld is not materialized through metafictional fragmentation and ironic jolts in mood and metaphor as it is in Coover and Barthelme, but through an immersion in the lexical environment and stylistics of the mythopoeic. Carter's approach to the mode is so deceptively subtle in its subversion of the fairy tale form and artful in its sleight-of-hand shifts in the ideological messages contained therein that these stories seem re-made from the inside out. In fact, the fundamental issue facing the critic of Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* is

whether Carter's professed *de*-mythologizing project should not more accurately be viewed as a *re*-mythologizing project. For the result of Carter's forays into fantasy is not a collection of decapitated folkways and eviscerated fables (such as in Sexton's *Transformations*, for example) but instead an entirely unique set of tales, beautifully told, displaying a mastery of both form and message. As such, the question one is forced to ask when dealing with Angela Carter is this: does the core-response of the Bluebeard narrative in *The Bloody Chamber* truly differ from the "classical" tradition as formulated in versions such as Charles Perrault's rendering of the tale?[66]

As discussed previously, the process of myth-making is a constantly regenerative process. In order for myths to remain vital and the language of myth to work its affect on the reader, they must be re-worded, revised and updated so as to continue to organize and influence the interpretation of experience. Perrault's "La Barbe Bleüe" ("Bluebeard"; AT311, AT312), for example, interprets — through an omniscient, masculine narrator — a 17th century world of male dominance and attempts to influence the prolongation of that same male dominance by making it appear to be the natural order of things. In a similar fashion, Carter's "The Bloody Chamber," interprets—through a first-person, female narrator—an early 20th century world of shifting gender roles and new feminist agencies and, like Perrault, Carter, too, attempts to influence the prolongation of a certain balance of power by portraying it as the natural, normal, proper order of things. And just as the tales of Perrault re-construct a robust, Christian, patriarchal *doxa* from the tenuous, pagan, matriarchal raw materials of the folk balladry and provincial lore that preceded it, so

[66] Though it should be acknowledged that the term, "classical," is inherently problematic in any kind of folkloric discourse, Bacchilega cites the Perrault version of the tale type as "the most authoritative version," as it is the earliest, most well-known and most widely published construction of the tale type. See Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, 106.

too does Carter's collection grapple with the raw materials of Perrault's *Histoires ou contes du temps passé, avec des moralités* (1697) in an attempt to propose a new interpretation of history and forge a new set of *moralités*.[67]

Though there are many obvious differences between Perrault's and Carter's respective renderings of the Bluebeard narrative (Carter's version even interposing a new tale type between AT311 [Sister Rescue] and AT312 [Brother Rescue]—*311A, Mother Rescue*),[68] nevertheless, both versions contain "innocent persecuted heroine" figures, structures of female objectification and possession, and masculine symbols of brutal virility. While these items are framed somewhat differently by each of these two authors, both tales clearly correspond to a common tradition. However, it is important to point out that, despite Carter's shift of perspective from Perrault's prurient narrator to the heroine's private view point, and despite Carter's alterations to the ending of the tale, the core-response of "The Bloody Chamber" is clearly one of adherence to the "original utopian impulse."

While the agent of victory has changed, the basic terms of the victory have not. Instead of the Bluebeard figure being run through by the heroine's two brothers (the action that releases the heroine from bondage and secures the financial betterment of her family, as it is formulated in Perrault's version),[69] in Carter's telling, the brazen, murderous Marquis is vanquished by a motherly bullet through

[67] Bacchilega's analysis in the "Be Bold, Be Bold, But not too Bold" chapter of her *Postmodern Fairy Tales,* offers a number of interesting comparisons between these two versions of the Bluebeard narrative (Aarne-Thompson types 311, 312, and the "Robber-Bridegroom" type 955) and the various renderings of its "moral" message by Perrault, Carter, Zipes, Bettelheim, and A. E. Johnson. See Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales,* 104-38.

[68] Bacchilega notes: "While I do not know of any 'Bluebeard' version in which the mother alone comes to the heroine's rescue, it is clear that in the folk tradition various possibilities are available and they are not gender-exclusive." See Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales,* 186 n.51.

[69] See Andrew Lang, "Blue Beard," 290-295; from Charles Perrault's "La Barbe bleüe," in *Histoires ou contes du temps passé, avec des moralités: Contes de ma mère l'Oye* (Paris, 1697).

the brain, and a new world order of non-retinal love, extra-sensory perception, and selfless humanism is allowed to prevail (40). No more an object to be possessed, Carter's heroine becomes the subject-possessor, clearly superior in agency to the poor, blind piano-tuner (Jean-Yves, her would-be, common-law husband), and, in the final assessment, a woman who esteems herself as a benefactrix without being a bourgeoise (40-41).[70] Though differently arranged, in both versions of the tale the heroine's monomythic cycle is successful, the elixir of social healing is attained, and the threshold of resurrection and return is triumphantly crossed (to borrow liberally from Joseph Campbell).

In fact, each of the tales in Carter's 1979 collection follows a similar pattern of retrieval and redress. The terms of the innocent persecuted victim's collapse and/or the origins of the loathly lady's torment are re-claimed, re-contexualized, and given a new perspective or a narrative voice that was absent or previously silent. In so doing, feminine attributes are turned from hamartic failings of character (i.e., flaws either directly or indirectly implied as being inherent in the female character) into faculties ignored and perversities excluded from precedent renderings. In this way, Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* plucks the fairy tale from its patriarchal, root-bound constraints, and places it, whole, in the fresh soil of a new utopian *doxa*. As such, *The Bloody Chamber* not only formally corresponds to the mythopoeic tradition, its core-response—despite its subversive reformulation of the utopian terms of the tradition—also remains primarily within the mythopoeic narrative mode.

[70] While the AT 312, 311, and 955 traditions typically end with the death of the monster and the passage of his wealth into the control of the surviving wife, Carter is careful to amend the tidy re-marriage and re-possession of the heroine in her telling, phrasing the heroine's casual relationship to Jean-Yves as more concerned with "setting up house" than with the exchange of vows. See Carter, *The Bloody Chamber,* 41.

Recasting the Bluebeard tale type within the low ironic mode, Robert Coover's "The Last One" (collected in *A Child Again*) is stylistically similar to both Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" and Perrault's "La Barbe Bleüe," though Coover's adaptation is decidedly less realistic in its denouement than either of these precedent versions. Told in the first-person from the perspective of the beastly Bluebeard figure, Coover's re-telling of the tale transposes Carter's emphasis on the heroine and presents Bluebeard as a misunderstood, anti-heroic protagonist of sorts. Rather than reveling in his misdeeds, Coover's murderous Bluebeard is revealed to be a hopeless romantic, wracked by regret, in search of a redemptive love capable of sealing him off from his own memory and, thereby, sealing the door of the bloody chamber in the process.

In a sardonic reply to the sentimental anguish of the Bluebeard figure, Coover's heroine, far from being curious, repays the beast in kind by requesting a private room of her own, wherein, the Bluebeard figure is led to believe, she intends to keep a collection of cherished items from her childhood. He, of course, agrees to this simple request and is at first quite pleased with his young wife's capacity to control her curiosity; she shows no interest whatsoever in his forbidden chamber and seems content with their agreement of mutual secrecy. Eventually, however, the locked room in the sole possession of his wife begins to affect his thoughts to such a degree that he becomes obsessed. And as the narrative progresses, his own secret chamber becomes less of an issue while the secret chamber possessed by his wife increasingly drives him to distraction. One morning he is certain that he hears voices on the other side of the locked door and, losing his wits completely, he smashes his way into the chamber only to find a miniature estate peopled with tiny bearded men

not unlike himself. The story closes as his wife picks him up by the head and, with a sigh of disappointment, places him among the others.

While it is clear that Coover's version formally corresponds to the tradition from which it is derived (it could not effectively deliver its surprise ending otherwise), analysis of Coover's version of the tale faces the difficulty of determining whether these changes simply constitute an adjustment to the utopian terms of the mythopoeic material, as in Carter's approach, or represent a more fundamental break from the utopian core.

A somewhat literal reading might see the reversal of the concluding scene as an exchange in the dynamics of power — the deceptive beast undone by the superior deception of his wife. Such a reversal would indicate that the patriarchal ideology suppressing the objectified wife (the persecuted female figure forever at risk of death at the hands of a more socially and physically powerful male figure) has been checked and replaced with a utopian ideology that calls for a more equal social and/or domestic balance of power. Such a reading would also see the young wife, not as an innocent persecuted victim, but as the self-saving champion of her own destiny. Instead of relying on the assistance of others for her salvation, the clever heroine orchestrates the terms of her own triumph from the very outset and, thus, reconfigures the Bluebeard figure into little more than a petty, depraved anachronism.

While the text might, to a limited extent, support such a complicated feminist-utopian reading, this approach would not adequately recognize the mechanism of the reversal and the ideological fracturing that actually takes place within the narrative. For, as Coover's ironic version takes the central metaphor of the

Bluebeard narrative and parodically re-appropriates the myth, a fundamental shift occurs in the narrative response to the utopian core. Indeed, as the victimizer becomes the victim, and vice versa, the ethical framework supporting any type of utopian reading is complicated by the fact that the reader can no longer be certain of where to place his or her sympathies. At best, the selection of either of the main characters as the protagonist would be a vicarious choice between one duplicitous anti-hero and the other. Furthermore, the narrative does not ask the reader to make such a decision, but instead derives its subversive power from this irresolvable imbalance.

Though Coover's low ironic version establishes a clear correspondence to the tradition from which it derives its parody, instead of a triumphal (utopian) return to the social realm (typical of narrative myth, fairy tale and romance), the supposed protagonist-narrator's power of action is drastically curtailed at the close of the tale and, thus, the Bluebeard figure is closed off from any sort redemptive resolution to what has, ostensibly, become his initiatory cycle. Suddenly no longer the champion of his own destiny (even in terms of the ritual death sequence that usually attends the AT312 tale type), Coover's Bluebeard figure is undone by the absurdity of his situation and becomes (like Kafka's Josef K., Mann's Aschenbach, or Eliot's Prufrock) little more than a dupe in a loaded game. And in the place of Perrault's conceited moralizing and Carter's sentimental didacticism, Coover heaps reversal upon reversal and leaves the reader, like the diminished Bluebeard figure, dangling in the enchanted grasp of an ironic mode of parodic discourse.

Unlike the "happily ever after" supplied by Carter's version, the narrative pattern that Coover employs in "The Last One" is quite clearly an anti-heroic pattern

of perpetual alienation rather than one of heroic return (i.e., following the low ironic pattern of "ironic descent" as described in the previous chapter). Coover's Bluebeard figure is rendered as little more than a member of a set of ambiguous victims (and not likely to be the last addition to that set either). This not only extends the indeterminate quality that attends the surprise reversal of the story's conclusion, the inverted structure of Coover's narrative also acts as a critique of Eliade's concept of "camouflage" by throwing both subject identity and mythical content into question. And by frustrating any attempt to locate the subject of the narrative's initiation, Coover complicates the reader's process of imagining a utopian social function for the few archetypal remnants of the initiatory process that are retained.[71] The result is a parodic simulacrum of the mythical material — a magic mirror that manipulates the structure of the narrative through an ironic re-evaluation of the structure of the Bluebeard tale type. And by treating the core of the myth as little more than a reversible artifice, Coover is able to strip back the thin layer of camouflage to reveal a glimpse into the occult mechanisms of possession and obsession hidden beneath the mythical surface.

While Coover's "The Last One" strategically manipulates the Bluebeard narrative structure in the service of complicating the ideological delivery mechanism of mythopoesis, ironic parody is seldom (if ever) empty of its own antagonistic transideological agenda. As Coover states during an interview with Frank Gado, the paradoxically transideological nature ironic narrative often involves an attempt to

[71] The reader's capacity to imagine a possible social function for the initiation (whether narratological, experiential, or otherwise) is prerequisite to the delivery of its magical message. As Bacchilega writes (synthesizing the theories of Eliade and Zimmer): "The tale of magic enacts on the level of the imagination and with enjoyable lightness the symbolic initiatory functions of ritual and myth; as such, these tales narratively intertwine physical, psychological, and social processes." See Bacchilega, "An Introduction to the 'Innocent Persecuted Heroine' Fairy Tale," 9.

critically investigate the sacred, re-open closed areas of discourse, and reveal the *doxa* as a distinctly human creation:

> Most of the society's effort goes into forging the construct, the creative form in which everybody can live – a social contract of sorts. . . . Whatever form they set up is necessarily entropic: eventually it runs down and is unable to propel itself past a certain point. When it does that, it becomes necessary to do everything that has been taboo: wear women's clothes, kill the sacred animal and eat it, screw your mother, etc. A big blast reduces everything to rubble; then something new is built. . . . Artists re-create: they make us think about doing all the things we shouldn't do, all the impossible, apocalyptic things, and weaken and tear down structures so that they can be rebuilt, releasing new energies. (*First Person* 157)

Although Coover's low ironic version of the Bluebeard tale definitely takes a step toward this type of subversive re-creation, in Barthelme's high ironic version of the tale several animals actually do, quite literally, fall victim to the full explosive force of revisionary violence. But rather than eat them, Barthelme festoons their sacred carcasses in designer eveningwear.

While the absurdity is turned up considerably in Barthelme's "Bluebeard" (collected in *Forty Stories*)[72] there are a number of striking similarities linking his adaptation to the versions discussed above. The narrative pattern of Barthelme's version, for example, like the events in Coover's version of the tale, also concerns a mysterious husband confounded by an infuriatingly incurious bride. However, instead of locating the narrative voice within the Bluebeard figure, Barthelme's narrating protagonist, like the first-person narrator in Carter's telling, is the young bride herself. But unlike Carter's protagonist, who is every inch an icon of innocence (irrespective of her remarkably progressive socialist agenda), Barthelme's

[72] Barthelme's "Bluebeard" originally appeared in the June 16, 1986 issue of *The New Yorker*. However, the version cited in this study will take all quotations and references from the version published in the 2005 Penguin edition of Barthelme's *Forty Stories*. See Barthelme, *Forty Stories*, 82-87.

journalistically disinterested protagonist seems to be all too aware of her situation and is even portrayed as having the presence of mind to set up a number of practical contingency plans should her marriage to Bluebeard fall through (or should his financial security falter at any point).

Apparently disaffected by her privileged life among the various baubles and curios hoarded by her strange husband ("a cut-pile Aubusson fire-extinguisher cover" [82], "Baroque rickrack in the manner of Vanbrugh and Hawksmoor" [83], "Buen Retiro white biscuit clock" [84], "Maxim gun" [85], etc.), and conscious of her own status as little more than an addition to this collection, Barthelme's heroine seems content enough to spend her days leafing through Benz-Daimler automobile catalogues and puttering about the grounds. And despite having arranged for a series of exact replicas to be made of the key to the forbidden chamber (one duplicate hidden by her lover, the chaplain, behind each of the fourteen Stations of the Cross in the mansion's chapel [86]), she seems in no haste to actually use any of them for any other purpose than as a means to continue her extra-marital liaisons.[73]

This situation incenses her husband to the extent that he finally confronts her one morning over breakfast, "Will you never attempt the door?" he asks (83). To which she answers:

> I repeated what I had told him previously: that I had no interest in the door or what lay behind it, and that I would gladly return the silver key he had given me if his mind would be eased thereby. "No, no" he said, "keep the key, you must have the key." (84)

[73] This element of the tale is clearly a satirical literalization of psychological approaches to the Bluebeard narrative such as Bruno Bettelheim's assessment in *The Uses of Enchantment*: "However one interprets 'Bluebeard,' it is a cautionary tale which warns: Women, don't give in to your sexual curiosity; men, don't permit yourself to be carried away by your anger at being sexually betrayed. There is nothing subtle about it; most of all, no development toward higher humanity is being projected" (301-2). To which Bacchilega replies, "When considered within a folkloristic framework, however, such cautionary readings [as Bettelheim's] appear narrow and unconvincing. . . ." See Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales,* 106.

Suddenly conflicted by what she comprehends to be her husband's desire that she visit the forbidden chamber, yet not having any stomach for viewing the gory display she imagines within, she contrives to lose the original key ". . . in the vicinity of the gazebo" (84).

This arrangement suffices for a time, but eventually, while in the middle of a game of croquet, Bluebeard pronounces: "You must open the door . . . even though I forbid it" (86). Though she protests, her husband insists (allowing Barthelme to work in an overtly parodic variation on Perrault's second moral):[74]

> "I change the exhibit from time to time," he said, grimacing. "You may not find, behind the door, what you expect. Furthermore, if you are to continue as my wife, you must occasionally be strong enough to go against my wishes, for my own good. Even the bluest beard amongst us, even the blackest nose, needs on occasion the correction of connubial give-and-take." (87)

Forced to the point more by her husband's prurience than by her own, the young bride asks for the return of the key (which Bluebeard had found by trolling the grounds with a horseshoe magnet [84]) and makes her way to the chamber. Finally at the threshold (after being briefly waylaid by a coded message from her financial advisor [87]), she unlocks the door only to discover:

> In the room, hanging on hooks, gleaming in decay and wearing Coco Chanel gowns, seven zebras. My husband appeared at my side. "Jolly, don't you think?" he said, and I said, "Yes, jolly," fainting with rage and disappointment . . . . (87)

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[74] The second *moralité* of Perrault's "La Barbe Bleüe," as translated by Andrew Lang in his 1889 collection, *The Blue Fairy Book*, is rendered: "Apply logic to this grim story, and you will ascertain that it took place many years ago. No husband of our age would be so terrible as to demand the impossible of his wife, nor would he be such a jealous malcontent. For, whatever the color of her husband's beard, the wife of today will let him know who the master is" (295). The translation of this passage selected by Bacchilega, however, is somewhat closer to Perrault's original sense: "Then the husband ruled as a king. / Now it's quite a different thing; / Be his beard what hue it may— / Madam has a word to say!" See Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales,* 105.

From Benz-Daimler catalogues to dead zebras, Barthelme's "Bluebeard" seems more like a comically anachronistic reprise of Richard Hamilton's iconic *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?* (1956) than a fairy tale in the tradition of Perrault. And like Hamilton's Pop-art collage, Barthelme's collage narrative is an equally de-constructive, pervasively media-saturated critique on the spectacle of contemporary existence. Taking the Bluebeard tale type more as a metaphorical template than a tradition, Barthelme dismantles and reorganizes the central metaphor of the source tale into a subversively redirected set of items, events, and characters. The resulting tale both satirizes the bourgeois foibles of contemporary Western society (by pointing an ironic finger at any reader that might sympathize with or share the same blasé, elitist values held by the narrator) while also compounding its primary, intertextual parody with a secondary, parodic critique of the cultural context of its own publication (i.e., as a piece in *The New Yorker*).

This secondary layer to the parody (using the primary level of the parody as a kind of textual platform) deepens the tale's satirical evaluation of 20th century consumer culture by directing its subversive attack against the immediate textual environment of the magazine in which it was published. By parodically and stylistically ridiculing the narratorial voice of high society reportage (as well as the uniquely *New Yorker*-esque, weekly-magazine world of non sequitur humour, fashionable historiography, luxury advertising, and op-ed commentary), Barthelme's high ironic version of the Bluebeard myth enacts a doubly parodic engagement with both the formal content of the mythical tale type and the pop-media context of its dissemination.

Although there is an obvious structural correspondence between Barthelme's adaptation and the other versions previously discussed, the core-response of Barthelme's version is in no way a reification or recuperation of any type of utopian impulse. Instead of a recuperation of this impulse, in Barthelme's tale this impulse is re-cast in the form of an excessively effete, epicurean consumerism. It is within this consumerism (with its characteristic blend of hubristic emptiness, insatiable appetite for novelty, and a tendency towards fetishism and paraphilia) that the privileged and ultimately problematic terms of the utopian core are located and satirized. In Barthelme's "Bluebeard," the wantonly consumerist and essentially self-consuming ideology surrounding this diseased, utopian core, far from presenting a means of unifying or perfecting the balance of society, leads only to the desolation of disposable experience and moments of obligatory communication, both of which come together in the absurd "exhibit" described at the tale's conclusion. And in place of the archetypal experience of initiation and the mythical resonance of ritual (traditionally symbolized in the Bluebeard narrative pattern by the blood-stained key, the discovery of the dismembered brides, and the final threshold conflict) Barthelme's tale substitutes the obscene kitsch of anthropomorphic taxidermy and the trivial comedy of a gallery opening with an exclusive guest-list of one.

In contrast to Carter's careful adherence to the formal structure and literary stylistics of the fairy tale tradition, both of which aid in strengthening the revised ideological message of her tale, Barthelme's explicitly parodic approach to the tradition is in constant antagonistic dialogue with its own message. Eschewing the type of recuperation attempted by Carter, Barthelme's transparent manipulation of form and style makes no effort to redress or subtly re-adjust the ideological terms of

the mythical source material. Barthelme's parodic version is instead directed at exposing and ridiculing, unapologetically, the moralism of the tale's questionable messages of privilege, possession, and desire. And different, also, from the distinctly low ironic pattern of tragic irony in Coover's claustrophobic version of the narrative (which limits its intramural critique to a self-alienating immersion into the world of the mythical parody), Barthelme's high ironic approach to the Bluebeard tradition foregrounds its explosive, extramural satire and extends the terms of its parody beyond the confines of the mythical to include the cultural and commercial contexts of its own production as well.

In Barthelme's "Bluebeard" the critical scope does not end with this dual parody of the sociocultural and socioeconomic systems of myth production; Barthelme's critique is also extended to the realm of nonfiction as well. For not only is the tale pieced together with the accouterments of an imaginary 1910 bourgeois lifestyle, it is also peopled with a curious mélange of historical and pseudo-historical figures. The names of artists and designers such as Poussin, Bronzino, and Le Corbusier rub shoulders with the likes of Jules Grévy[75] and the Bishop of Troyes (Saint Lupus of Troyes?). And at one point in the narrative, Bluebeard (while waving around a bottle of tequila) even accuses his wife of having an affair with Doroteo Arango (Pancho Villa) after the two are revealed as having become acquainted at the Paris residence of the narrator's aunt, Thérèse Perrault (85). While this "Perrault" is, by all accounts, completely fictional and seems to be included in the narrative primarily as a means of alluding to Charles Perrault, the uncertainty that attends

[75] It must be noted that although François Paul Jules Grévy (President of the French Third Republic; in office 1879-1887) is alluded to in the text only as: "M. Grévy, the Finance Minister" (87), the fact that this French president has his name attached to a rare species of zebra (Grévy's zebra, *Equus grevyi*) makes such an auspicious, if somewhat incidental, connection unavoidable.

Barthelme's conflation of the historical and the pseudo-historical directly affects the epistemic stability of the narrative environment by incorporating an erratic, highly mythicized trace of "fact" into the narrative.[76]

Rather than acting to establish a sense of authentic historicity or a set of fixed temporal boundaries, Barthelme's eclectic assemblage of notables is thrown together with as much attention to biographical development and temporal fixity as an autograph collection.[77] Yet the point worth noticing here is not merely that each of these names is invested with a token significance that says little or nothing about its own temporal relation to the year 1910 (a year, incidentally, not without its own blend of mythical, historical, and literary significance), but more importantly that each of these names operates at the nexus of an unstable synthesis of historical referent and mythical subject, both of which are textually inseparable.[78] By tapping into the historico-mythical resonance of these names and recognizing the central role of narrative in arbitrating the terms of this balance, Barthelme's tale gestures towards the continuous link uniting the spectrum of myth with the spectrum of nonfiction and historiography. This gesture is, on one level, a form of structural buttressing for the tale's secondary, contextual parody of the high society gossip-column genre (i.e., performing the role of a fantasy who's-who list of famous historical acquaintances

[76] In Hayden White's essay, "Postmodern and Textual Anxieties," White argues that one of the major aporias that is "transcended" by the shift from the traditionalist view of history (which believes in a sense of historical fixity) to the postmodern, or, "textualist," view of history (i.e. history as a linguistic construct) is the fact/fiction dichotomy. White writes: "Since facts are themselves linguistic constructions, 'events under a description,' *facts* have no reality aside of language. So while events may have happened, the representation of them as *facts* endows them with all the attributes of literary and even mythic subjects." See Hayden White, *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory, 1957-2007*, 313.

[77] White describes the postmodern treatment of history as "a reserve of curiosities and 'collectibles,'" and continues: "These ['collectibles'] can be wrenched from their historical contexts and inserted into any of various presentations of the past—less as documents, relics, monuments, or indices thereof than as merely *virtual* past objects or objects of a *virtual past.*" See White, *Fiction of Narrative,* 308.

[78] Fredric Jameson brings up a similar point in the context of E. L. Doctorow's use of historical names in *Ragtime* (1975). See Jameson, *Postmodernism,* 23-25.

and in-crowd connections). However, the narratological implications of this gesture are also significant for its subtle equation of history and myth, and its subordination of both to the agency of the narrator.

This privileging of the narrator's agency and narratorial purview, described in the previous chapter as an expansion of the narrator's and/or protagonist's power of action, is perhaps the most definitive characteristic of the high ironic mode of narrative and one that allows for an important delineation between the types of parody employed in these three tales.

As should be apparent, Carter's neo-traditional revision of the tale curtails this narratorial expansion and finally maneuvers her tale toward a kind of tentative realism. While the mode of myth, in which Carter's tale operates, offers the potential for a similar expansion of the narrator's power of action, adherence to the central utopian core of the mythic requires the tale to progress in one of two directions: an outward movement toward the sacred, esoteric end of the mythic spectrum (with a concurrent increase in power of action), or an inward movement towards the profane, exoteric, experiential zero-point of the spectrum (with an attendant decrease in power of action). Carter's movement in the experiential direction, while facilitating the "real world" terms of her revision of the tale type's moralistic agenda, nevertheless precludes any substantial expansion of the narrator's power of action.

Barthelme's "Bluebeard," on the other hand, operates along the spectrum of metafiction and, as such, is faced with a slightly different choice of narrative progression: an outward movement toward the absurdly nonsensical, unrestricted, "receivable" end of the spectrum (with a coincident increase in power of action), or an inward movement toward the more voyeuristic, experientially limited area of

metafiction (with a concurrent decrease in power of action). Barthelme's high ironic tale, in its disregard for conventional temporality and with its multiple layers of parody, follows the outward trajectory, whereas the low irony of Coover's "The Last One" clearly corresponds to the inward tendency. Although both of these tales operate from within the metafictional spectrum, what marks the key difference between these two versions is the tragically ironic collapse that confounds the narrator at the end of Coover's tale. And in contrast to Coover's curtailment of narratorial agency, Barthelme's unresolved, comic interpretation does not indicate or imply any limits to the expansion of the narrator's power of action. In Barthelme's "Bluebeard" there is no final realistic condensation, no anti-heroic collapse, but instead the implication of a continuous narratorial expansion. And just as there is nothing present in Barthelme's text to inhibit the narration from conjuring anything at all into the textual environment of the narrative (from motorcar infatuations to Le Corbusier quotations), so too does the parodic scope of the narrative extend beyond the mythical framework and into the realm of historiographic discourse.

This playful extension of the narrative into the nonfictional realm of historiographic discourse is not a sentimental exercise, nor is it in any way an attempt to legitimize, accurately contextualize, or establish a stable historical context for the narrative. As with its parodic subversion of myth, the high ironic approach to nonfiction represents an attempt to reveal and subvert the ideological messages hidden behind the camouflaged surface of historiographic language. And, also akin to its engagement with myth, the high ironic version of history pretends to take its nonfictional fragments "as is," with all implied connections and cultural connotations left intact. Eschewing a more covert, satirical approach, the high ironic approach is

immediate, deceptively overt, and angled towards a treatment of history that complicates the correspondence between symbol and coded meaning, which leaves much of the interpretation up to the connections made by the reader.

However, instead of inserting a coded metonymic model as a stand-in for the ideology being subverted — symbol (A) referring to figure (B) which represents ideology (C) (e.g., in the manner of Jonathan Swift and Laurence Sterne), high ironic works such as Barthelme's "Bluebeard" often skip directly to stage (B) and parade the historical figure, citation, or situation into the narrative without any attempt made to encode it. The result, while certainly more direct, is much less directed by the author's choice of figurative encoding. Barthelme, for example, presents Pancho Villa and Le Corbusier without masks, like cameo walk-ons entering the text as themselves. This undirected use of history as a metaphor for itself is far less stable than the traditional approach to satire, which is typically regulated by the author's choice of metonymic symbolism. And by removing this primary symbolic layer and presenting the fragments and figures of history "as is," the primary interpretation of how these pieces of history relate to the narrative is left up to the interpretive capabilities of the reader. Although it would be false to claim that all works of high ironic narrative deal with history in as explicit a manner and with as many direct citations as appear in Barthelme's "Bluebeard," nevertheless, it is safe to say that narrative in this mode typically betrays a discernable anxiety regarding its own temporal location within history—an anxiety that directly affects the epistemological stability of the fragments and figures cited in the high ironic text.

By challenging the mutual exclusivity of history and myth, Barthelme not only locates his text within the metafictional space between them, the awkward

blending of discourses in "Bluebeard" also aligns this tale with the type of postmodern parody variously described as "historiographic metafiction" (Hutcheon), "postmodern romance" (Elam), and "metahistorical romance" (Elias).[79] Although Barthelme's short story does not explore the complicated area of postmodern historiography to the epic lengths of Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960), Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), or Coover's *The Public Burning* (1976), it does introduce many of the same critically parodic mechanisms and engages in a similar act of anachronistic juxtaposition.

In *Romancing the Postmodern,* Diane Elam argues that this anachronistic juxtaposition of disparate events, figures, literary genres, and narrative modes is not merely a postmodern problematizing of such high modernist concerns as causality, temporality, objectivity, and historicity, it also represents the baffled awareness that postmodernism has of itself and its own inherently paradoxical historicity as both preceding and following modernity (12). The upshot of this is that postmodern narrative finds itself in the very awkward position of being, simultaneously, its own literary antecedent and consequence, forever caught in the gap between the narratological traces of a projected past and the manifold arbitrations of the present.[80] According to Elam, these defining temporal disjunctions are reflected in the fractured, metahistorical temporalities and structural multiplicities of the mode of narrative that develops within the historical vacuum of postmodernism. Elam writes:

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[79] As is described in greater detail in chapter 5 of this dissertation, while differing slightly in emphasis, these terms overlap sufficiently to qualify their correlation to the mode of high irony as it is defined here. For a precise definition of "historiographic metafiction." See Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, 110; for "postmodern romance," see Elam, *Romancing the Postmodern: Romance, History, and the Figure of Woman*, 12-13; and for "metahistorical romance," see Elias, *Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction*, xviii.

[80] Jean-François Lyotard makes a similar observation: "*Postmodern* would be understanding according to the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*)." See Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982-1985*, 24.

> The juxtaposition of differing historical periods is not simple contradiction; postmodernism does not simply reaffirm traditional narratives against modernism, [nor does it] return to the past in order to separate the medieval or the mythic from the modern. . . . What we are dealing with here is the breakdown of an overarching historical sequence, of the possibility of "metahistory" itself, in Hayden White's terms. Postmodernism is . . . the coexistence of multiple and mutually exclusive narrative possibilities without a point of abstraction from which we might survey them. . . . [It] is an *ironic coexistence* of temporalities. (13, Elam's emphasis)

This "ironic coexistence" of multiple, often conflicting temporalities, Elam argues, amounts to a synchronic re-construction of events, which she defines as "ironic temporality" (50). This "ironic temporality," she explains, is not so much an exercise in ahistorical fantasy as it is a critical response to the unquestioned, material "reality" of culture and a radical interrogation of the relationship between history and its pretense of realism (50). The type of narrative that operates within this "ironic temporality," Elam writes, takes its narrative shapes and archetypal patterns from romance and applies them to a transformation of history that refuses to ignore the "unreality of the event," and which, through this refusal, exchanges this problematic "unreality" for "the potential of an otherness too alien to be 'reality'" (50). And emerging from within the warped space-time of this narratologically re-configured continuum, Elam maintains, is the genre of "postmodern romance."

As Elam describes it, within this genre:

> History stops making sense. The aesthetics and politics of postmodern romance are bound to the transgressive relationship it forges between a theory of history and a theory of culture. . . . [It] attempts to revisit culture by refusing to dismiss the challenge of the past, by refusing to represent it either objectively (realistically) or subjectively (as a matter of attitude). . . .The ironic temporality characteristic of the postmodern condition means . . . that we can never take hold of the "now". . . . Postmodernism is not a "now" but a haunting, excessive return of past events. (50)

Elam's recognition of the "transgressive" re-imagination of history that occurs within "postmodern romance" is important for its highlighting of the postmodern obsession with past events as well as for its formulation of the profound doubt that marks this type of narrative and generally characterizes the high ironic mode of narrative discourse.

Also significant is the direct connection of Elam's analysis to the definition of postmodern parody forwarded by Linda Hutcheon in *The Politics of Postmodernism.* As Hutcheon famously contends, "[The postmodern] reprise of the past of art is not nostalgic, it is always critical" (89). According to Hutcheon, the postmodern parodic reprise of precedent forms is not a de-historicizing displacement or a complete removal of historical context, it is rather "a double process of installing and ironizing" (89). Through this ironic process of citation and critical appraisal, Hutcheon writes, "parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference" (89).

Although this process plays somewhat less than a prominent role in the works selected from Carter and Coover, it is clearly evident in the example taken from Barthelme. In Barthelme's high ironic "Bluebeard," every aspect of the source material is installed and methodically ironized: from the tale's "classical" context as a product of 18th century, French salon culture to its postmodern re-designation as magazine content, from its visceral message of desire to the aesthetic, psychological, and commercial ideologies surrounding the interpretation of that desire, and, most importantly, from its place in the fictional spectrum of myth to its place within the nonfictional spectrum of history—each of these contexts makes an appearance and is confronted and ironically addressed.

Hutcheon's dialectical pairing of "continuity and difference" is also an incredibly efficient reply to the question of correspondence and response that opened the analysis of these three works. However, like the concept of core-response forwarded in this chapter, Hutcheon's dialectical framing of postmodern parody is equally conscious of the aporia that obtains between an adherence to traditional form versus formal deconstruction on one side, and ideological dissemination versus transideological subversion on the other. Nevertheless, Hutcheon's emphasis upon the critical nature of the postmodern parodic mechanism is crucial to an appreciation of the various differences, both formal and ideological, that are revealed when the core-response of the parody is taken into consideration. This core-response, in the case of high ironic metafiction, is not simply made as a counter to the central utopian impulse of the mythopoeic, this subversive response — and the profound doubt that attends it — is also present in its parodic interactions with the questionable epistemology of historiographic discourse as well.

This analysis of correspondence and response also makes it clear that such abstract narratological terms as "anti-fairy tale," "demythicization," and "(co)respondence" do present seductive detours for the folklorist seeking to remain up-to-date with contemporary trends in the use (and, perhaps, also the perversion) of mythopoesis. Nevertheless, these detours are not necessarily the most accurate means of describing the various formal currents and transideological counter-currents active in contemporary literature. In an attempt to redress these inaccuracies, this chapter maintains that by establishing the literary characteristics of metafiction, defining its location in relation to other varieties of narrative discourse, and identifying the literary modes that employ metafictional narrative structures, the concept of

metafiction can be retrieved from a merely tropological and/or rhetorical designation and placed in a more prominent and, therefore, more narratologically useful position. This typological re-classification is essential to a clear assessment of postmodern narrative and its myriad forms of ironic literary praxis.

While the critical approach taken in this chapter is by no means an exhaustion of the debates surrounding metafiction, postmodern parody and narrative irony, it does introduce a number of the key issues that are considered at greater depth in the chapters to follow. Primary among these issues, as outlined in these initial chapters, is the high ironic expansion of the protagonist's and/or the narrator's power of action. In the following chapter, this is traced through the high ironic exploration of metaphor in Coover's *Pricksongs & Descants* (1969).

CHAPTER THREE

ROBERT COOVER: METAFICTIONAL PARODY AND METAPHORICAL IMMERSION IN *PRICKSONGS & DESCANTS*

> I am personally convinced, if you will permit me, that there is a middle road, whereon we recognize that innovations find their best soil in traditions, which are justified in their turn by the innovations which created them. I believe, then, that law and custom are essential, but that it is one's constant task to review and revise them. In spite of that, however, *some things still make me puke!*
>
> --- Robert Coover, "The Marker,"
> *Pricksongs & Descants,*1969

Undressing the Metaphor

Robert Coover's works repeatedly remind the reader that language and literature, myth and metaphor are human constructs and, as such, are contained within the imaginary boundaries of vocabulary and socio-political convention. However, his fiction argues (with a clear voice of its own), these systematically bounded and ultimately dogmatic constructs do not necessarily indicate an absolute limit to the innovative potential of language and literature. These constructs are also the very basis upon which innovation differentiates itself from innovation in an endless progression of linguistic growth and narrative renewal. Though the boundaries of the system cannot be destroyed, as they exist only in the collective imagination, they can be attacked, holes punched in walls, lewd graffiti composed, violent changes made to the internal architecture, all of which plays — and *play* should be emphasized here — a direct role in altering the structure of language and the nature of the narrative that emerges from that altered language.

While this concept of continual renewal and differentiation runs throughout Coover's prodigious list of works, nowhere is it more distilled than in the 1969 short story collection *Pricksongs & Descants*. Here the punched holes and graffiti become the very frames of viewing the mangled mythic interior of narrative itself, Coover's prurient narration guiding the reader through the squat-house of language, from room to room, tale to tale, metaphor to metaphor.

However, before launching into a full-scale analysis of this extremely varied and complex collection of stories, it is important first to consider Coover's writing as a linguistic process before considering it as a literary product. For, although the obvious way of approaching and comprehending Coover's interior re-/deconstruction project in *Pricksongs & Descants* is through its parodic manipulation of precedent narrative forms, Coover consistently denies the label of parodist, insisting that it is actually within the more intimate space of metaphor that his craft takes place. As he states in a recent interview:

> Everything is parody in a sense. We've got one story and we tell it over and over. So we unavoidably parody even as we try not to parody. But I never think of what I do as parody, at least not in any programmatic or satirical sense. I tend to start with a metaphor and this metaphor contains a parcel of imagery that needs to be unpacked. Sometimes something like a pre-existent form seems to open up as a kind of container for it, bringing with it other elements with which to play. Rather than consciously parodying another form, one discovers oneself embraced by it. And trying not to be engulfed. ("An Interview with Robert Coover")

Coover implies that the very act of writing (indeed, language itself) is, by default, an exercise in parody — a manipulation of form within form — each metaphor being contained within and calling up other metaphors, each with its own specific set of attributes. Finding a way to structure and manipulate these attributes without being manipulated by them, Coover warns, is both the writer's vocation and predicament.

For Coover, the only fundamental quantity in the writer's reality is this quantum persistence of metaphor — functioning in many ways like a kind of narrative atomic particle that can be combined with other particles for magical effect — each metaphor containing its own unique valences and potential for volatility when its structural integrity is compromised.[81] As Coover remarks to Larry McCaffery in *Anything Can Happen*:

> They're the germ, the thought, the image, the idea, out of which all the rest grows. They're always a bit elusive, involving thoughts, feelings, abstractions, visual material, all at once. I suppose they're a little like dream fragments, in that such fragments always contain, if you analyze them, so much more than at first you suspect. . . . Some, when you pry them open, have too little inside to work with. Others are unexpectedly fat and rich. (66)

And like a postmodern Democritus, pairing literature down to its constituent parts, Coover's interest lies in the metaphor as a unit of meaning that can be isolated and "pried open" — each metaphor a clue to unraveling the mystery of cognition. As McCaffery notes in *The Metafictional Muse*, "Coover is hoping to illuminate not only the process through which narrative art is created but also the broad base of metaphor through which the universe is comprehended" (26).

This process, McCaffery argues, is comparable to Colin Turbayne's analytical dissection of metaphor and analogy in *The Myth of Metaphor*. In this study, Turbayne deconstructs the grammatical mechanisms of Descartes's mind-body dualism and Newton's universe-as-machine analogy and contends that it is absolutely essential to consider the linguistic structure and precise syntax of accepted theory (or that of any concept posing as "Truth"), for in order to fully comprehend

[81] Robert Scholes writes: "Coover's technique is to take the motifs of folk literature and explode them into motivations and revelations, as the energy might be released from a packed atomic structure." See Scholes, "Metafiction," 113.

such concepts as works of metaphorical articulation rather than as epistemological or ontological absolutes, one must locate and "undress" the metaphor that actually contains the concept. Turbayne describes the three basic steps of this process as occurring along the following lines:

> First, the detection of the presence of the metaphor; second, the attempt to "undress" the metaphor by presenting the literal truth . . . and third, the restoration of the metaphor, only this time with awareness of its presence. (*The Myth of Metaphor* 56)

According to McCaffery, the similarity of method between Coover and Turbayne is found in their mutual concern for the disguised, latent, or nascent content of a given metaphor and the importance of detecting, undressing, and restoring it or, in Coover's terms, prying it open and unpacking it to get a better look at what's actually inside.

In *Anything Can Happen*, Coover argues that this deconstructive process is a crucial means of reminding the reader that narrative (in speech, writing, and even memory) is always a reduction of the world into an isolated, comprehensible unit. These narrative units that circulate as stories, which order our place in the world and condition our understanding of it, can only ever represent an artificial and, therefore, inherently limited perspective of the world:

> All of them . . . are merely artifices—that is, they are always in some ways false, or at best incomplete. There are always other plots, other settings, other interpretations. So if some stories start throwing their weight around, I like to undermine their authority a bit, work variations, call attention to their fictional natures. (*Anything Can Happen* 68)

According to Coover, this structural encounter with the nature of narrative not only involves a critical analysis of its fundamental artificiality, this encounter also embodies the recognition that: "If storytelling is central to the human experience,

stories about storytelling, or stories which talk about themselves as stories, become central, too" (*Anything Can Happen* 68). In the works of Coover, this concept often plays out in novels that are painfully aware of their own fictional nature, in parody that cannibalizes its own species, and in stories — such as those collected in *Pricksongs & Descants* — which actually appear bent on causing lasting damage to the metaphors and narrative mechanisms being applied.

The aggressive narcissism and skeptical self-reflexivity of Coover's "stories about storytelling" not only foreground the latent psychosexual and/or socio-political content of narrative, they also actively foreground the structural processes, or, *praxis,* of the storytelling act: the narration. This emphasis upon the act of narration is precisely the mechanism by which the narrator's power of action is expanded (as described in the first two chapters of this dissertation). This paradoxical practice of self-reflexive narrative reduction (in the sense of reducing narrative to a set of manipulable structures) and narrational expansion places Coover's metafiction firmly within the high ironic mode and, in a manner analogous to Turbayne's, follows a similar process of narrative anatomization.

In *Pricksongs & Descants,* this metafictional process includes the following components, each of which will be explored during the course of the chapter:

1.) Privileging of the Signifier: By emphasizing the symbolic variability of the linguistic signifier, static, monological interpretation is subverted and the reader becomes participatively engaged in a game of linguistic wordplay.
2.) Undermining of the Metaphor: By ironically contradicting, negating, and/or reconfiguring the structure of a given metaphor, the metaphor is destabilized as a unit of fixed symbolic meaning.

3.) Stylistic Re-Structuring: By parodically re-interpreting and/or over-interpreting familiar narrative patterns (especially myth and folk traditions), new avenues of narrative development become available.

4.) Fracturing of Identity / Multiplicity of Voice: By expanding the possibilities of the narration via the application of intrusive, unreliable, and/or multiple narrators, not only is the narrator's power of action increased, the potential development of any stable sense of narratorial identity is problematized.

5.) Non-Linearity / Multiplicity of Choice: By upsetting the reader's assumption of logical, cause-and-effect progression, narrative non-linearity leads to an expanded, more participative reading experience.

This list, in many ways a compliment to the analyses already presented in the first two chapters of this dissertation, represents a further reminder that metafictional narrative within the high ironic mode always involves a critical approach to the fiction-making process. This critique does not attempt to exempt itself, but, on the contrary, serves to spotlight its own artificial nature as fiction through overt self-reflexivity, fragmentation, and involutional narrative structures that interrupt the reader's reactive tendency to construct hermeneutic strategies for interpretation and/or complicate the reader's creation of cognitive boundaries between the real and the artificial.

Privileging the Signifier

Primary among these metafictional components is perhaps this privileging of the linguistic signifier. In fact, the very title of the text in question, *Pricksongs & Descants*, provides a perfect example of Coover's tactical subversion of monological

hermeneutics and meaning assignation. At the primary level of interpretation (i.e., taking these terms at their most literal), Coover's title appears to metaphorically activate a reference to musical notation. The term *pricksong*, as defined by the *OED*, pertains to "music sung from notes written or pricked."[82] In complement to this term, *descant* is defined as "a melodious accompaniment to a simple musical theme . . . the earliest form of counterpoint."[83] The exchange and interplay of this point and counterpoint, as McCaffery also observes in his analysis, is a balanced harmony of parts (62). While this reading obviously relates to the overall project of Coover's story collection (especially in its orchestration of monad and dyad, tradition and variation, precedent and critique), the metaphor doesn't rest there. These songs and cants are also, as the Granny figure reveals in the first tale of the collection: "old death-cunt-and-prick songs . . . polyphonies [composed] outa dread and appetite . . . eclogues sprung from disaster" (3, Coover's syntax).[84] Thus activated, the words of the title become flooded with suggestive innuendo and euphemism. No longer simply framed as a quaint exercise in intertextual discourse, the collection's thematic absorption with sex and death emerges like a paranomasic mist, enshrouding every tale with an ominous potency and loading every phrase with duplicitous potential.

Throughout the stories of *Pricksongs & Descants* (hereafter *PD*) this flooding of the linguistic signifier with interpretive variability prevents the establishment of a stable meaning (a metafictional characteristic shared with both Barthelme and Reed, as explored in the following chapters). Such variability forces the reader to vacillate

[82] See "Pricksong," *OED*, Third edition, March 2007.
[83] "Descant," *OED*, Second edition, 1989; online version December 2011.
[84] Also, as should be apparent to folklorists and those familiar with fairy tale genealogy, the root of the English word *cant* also has a direct etymological connection to the French, *conte*, and the Italian, *cunti*; typically translated as "tale" or "story."

back and forth between exegetic and eisegetic strategies of epistemological construction — neither of which is ever completely satisfactory. The result is the establishment of a pervasive doubt as to the lexical value, semantic limitations, and indeed, the very plausibility of semiological signification as the locus of meaning construction.

This region between exegesis and eisegesis is expanded to darkly comic proportions in "Panel Game," the first of Coover's "Seven Exemplary Fictions" — a series of seven experimental vignettes in which Coover tests the boundaries of narrative discourse. Written in the second-person, "Panel Game" involves the fictive "you" in a TV game show — also starring a wry, sarcastic "Clown," a "Lovely Lady," a grossly obese "Mr. America" (whose name later changes to "Mr. Amentia" [i.e., retardation]), an automatic "Audience," and presided over by an evasive "Moderator" bent more on inciting anxiety than encouraging any kind of fair-play. Though it is clear from the start that some sort of competition is taking place ("Situation: television panel game, live audience" [62]), the precise rules of play fail to materialize and the result is a frenzied onomatomaniacal scramble to make some sense (i.e., to literally manufacture meaning) out of an incomprehensible stream of epistemologically volatile, yet essentially arbitrary linguistic signs.[85]

Simultaneously, removed from the safety of his/her extratextuality and "dragged protesting from the Audience, nondescript introduced as Unwilling Participant" (62, Coover's syntax), both reader and second-person persona become engaged in the task of deciphering the Clown's dubiously meaningful remark: "Reminds me of the old story of the three-spined stickleback!" (63). The attempt to

[85] Neil Schmitz refers to the explosive signs in Coover's story as: "Iconic words, ostensible keys to ostensible meanings." See Schmitz, "Robert Coover and the Hazards of Metafiction," 214.

interpret this remark results in an absurd, linguistic flurry of allusion and pun. Homophonic hopscotch and synonymic leapfrog collide (and collude) as the second-person persona frantically searches for the code within the code:[86]

> So think. Stickleback. Freshwater fish. Freshwater fish: green seaman. Seaman: semen. Yes, but green: raw? spoiled? vigorous? Stickle: stubble. Or maybe scruple. Back: Bach: Bacchus: baccate: berry. Raw berry? Strawberry? Maybe. Sticky berry in the raw? In the raw: bare. Bare berry: beriberi. Also bearberry, the dog rose, dogberry. Dogberry: the constable, yes, right, the constable in . . . what? *Comedy of Errors!* Yes! No. (*PD* 63)

Although the near-miss of Dogberry as a character in Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*—rather than as the malapropistic constable in *Much Ado About Nothing*—might appear to the reader as an absurd, yet vaguely plausible validation of the interpretive method being employed (especially in the play's correspondence to the absurdity of the panel game and its similar interplay of identity, disguise, and fumbling language), it too becomes a blind-alley as the potential clues continue to pile up, conflate, and lead from one dead end to the next in an interpretive maze without any apparent exit.[87] As Paul Maltby describes the predicament in *Dissident Postmodernists*:

> Typically, the reader seeks the information that will tell him/her what the participant does not know – a futile exercise in view of how Coover positions the reader; he/she is just as ignorant of the rules of

[86] In his analysis of "Panel Game," Paul Maltby writes: "Here the participant frenetically switches from code to code (e.g., homophony or synonymity as sources of signification) in an effort to generate meaning. Yet, the process of signifiers appears interminable; there is no natural or self-evident endpoint at which a definitive meaning emerges," *Dissident Postmodernists: Barthelme, Coover, Pynchon* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1991): 82.

[87] On the topic of "the maze without an exit," Gabrielle Spiegel notes: "It is precisely this mobility of meaning, the discontinuous, fractured, and indeterminate nature of writing, that makes it impossible for us to establish a fixed point outside of discourse which guarantees its objective reality. Thus the text is radically decentered, since there is no referent outside the play of linguistic signifiers, no ground outside language which controls its interpretive range. The interpretation of any signifying chain (or of any text) produces only another chain of signs, and we enter, as Northrop Frye foresaw, 'an endless labyrinth without an outlet' [*Anatomy of Criticism*, 118]," see Gabrielle Spiegel, "History, historicism and the social logic of the text in the Middle Ages," in *The Postmodern History Reader*, Ed. Keith Jenkins (Milton Park: Routledge, 1997): 199-200.

> the game. The reader *expects* that the clue-words will eliminate the possibilities of meaning in the passage to the disclosure of a final meaning. Instead, those possibilities proliferate as Coover conspicuously manipulates the rules of language. (83, Maltby's emphasis)

Dizzy from the lights and weaving, zooming cameras, unnerved by the jeers of the Clown, harried by the impatience of the Moderator and the increasingly hostile laughter of the Audience, the fictive "you" continues to search for a basis from which to build only to find each carefully reasoned fragment of linguistic structure immediately disappear into the ether like the discards of a skydiving poker player. And, as Maltby's analysis implies, analogous to the vertiginous semiotic strife of the "Unwilling Participant," the reader, too, has little choice in the matter—either participate (however willingly) in this confluence of cognition, or not (*to read, or not to read,* seems to be the question; *Hamlet?* Yes! Maybe.).

Increasing in intensity as Audience laughter overlaps with the quizzical quips of the Moderator, this participatory dilemma quickly begins to assume a stark, existential character. For as this one-sided game progresses it becomes clear that a failure to decode the Clown's phrase correctly will, in all likelihood, result in execution (*PD* 68). In fact, the entire duplicitous affair, both as a story (for the reader to experience) and as a fictional scenario (for the fictive "you" to experience), is incrementally revealed as little more than a meaningless preamble to the only possible (and therefore, by default, meaningful) conclusion: death. As the Moderator mockingly croons:

> *Don't twiddle or piddle*
> *Or diddle your middle*
> *While riding a riddle, old Sport—*
> . . . . . .
> *—For the frame is the same*
> *In fame or in shame*

And the name of the game—
. . . . . .
—is La Mort! (*PD* 69)

And with that, a noose is lowered around the Unwilling Participant's neck. However, just before the lever is pulled, the Moderator cryptically alludes to *Much Ado About Nothing* (*PD* 70), suggesting that although the protagonist was, perhaps, on the right track after all, ironically, the revelation of the answer is completely irrelevant to the game now that it has already reached its curtain call.

While absurdity, bondage, and death mark the trajectory of the second-person protagonist's ironic descent (a narrative pattern typical of the low ironic mode, as described in chapters one and two), what sets "Panel Game" apart and confirms its placement within the high ironic mode are the story's overt, metafictional manipulations of narrative form, its subversion of its own systems of linguistic signification, and its direct, participative engagement with the reader.

In "Panel Game," this type of metafictional manipulation tends to lead away from the literal sense of the semiotic units being deployed, opening them up for a multitude of interpretations and, thereby, privileging the signifier over the signified—the latter becoming more of a ghost-like variable than a source of direct, semiological meaning.[88] This privileging also tends to treat the linguistic sign itself like a highly volatile semantic isotope (to repeat an earlier metaphor) that can be split to produce other sign types and tokens from the fragments of each fractured sign (e.g., "Stickleback . . . Back: Bach: Bacchus: baccate: berry," as in the passage

[88] According to similar assessments by David Lodge, Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, and Christine Brooke-Rose, this ghost-like nature tends toward zero with the introduction of irony. See Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative & Structure, Especially of the Fantastic* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981): 385-89.

above).[89] Although this splitting and re-splitting might continue indefinitely, *ad absurdum*, with every split the actual linguistic significance of the initiating signifier (e.g., "Stickleback," in this instance) lessens appreciably, emptying out its significance with every division and leaving the reader with little more than a spent shell of letters.[90]

Undermining the Metaphor

In "The Door: A Prologue of Sorts" and "The Magic Poker" this same type type of reactive splitting occurs at the level of the metaphor.[91] As described earlier, by ironically contradicting, negating, and/or reconfiguring the structure of a given metaphor, the metaphor is destabilized as a unit of fixed symbolic meaning. As is the case with the privileged signifier, the fracturing of the metaphor is also an effective means of emptying out its contents and revealing its textual, intertextual, and extratextual connections.

Coover's choice of familiar fairy tale patterns as the basis for this critical approach to symbol and metaphor is also significant. For beneath the metaphorical surface of the fairy tale narrative, cunningly veiled in the moral programming of fairy tale power relationships, writhes a world of repressed desires and anxieties. As Jack Zipes explains in *Why Fairy Tales Stick*:

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[89] As discussed later in this dissertation's chapter on Ishmael Reed, this semiotic volatility exists in and, indeed, drives the parodic, intertextual relations that occur in the game of "signifyin(g)" play.

[90] This process, when allowed to proceed unchecked, typically results in the "receivable text," as defined by Barthes and described in the previous chapters of this dissertation.

[91] It is important to note in passing that Coover's technique of metaphoric destabilization is not limited to his short fiction (although it does figure prominently in several stories from *A Night at the Movies* [1987] and *A Child Again* [2005]), but is extensively practiced in several of his novels including: *The Origin of the Brunists* (1966)*, The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop*. (1968), *Pinocchio in Venice* (1991), *Ghost Town* (1998), and also figures prominently in the structure of several of his plays and novellas, such as *A Theological Position* (1972), *Spanking the Maid* (1982), *Briar Rose* (1996), and *Stepmother* (2004).

> What the fairy tale does . . . is represent basic human dilemmas in tangible metaphorical forms that reflect how difficult it is for us to curb basic instincts. Fairy tales are all about basic instincts and genetic evolution within a civilizing process. (131)

According to Zipes, the fairy tale is a fundamentally metaphorical mode of representation that communicates vital information about real-world situations through symbolic narrative structures (*Why Fairy Tales Stick* 95-101). As the "true," literal content of the fairy tale has been deemed too sacred, too carnal, or potentially traumatizing to behold in its full actuality, metaphorical narrative forms are developed with which to convey this information and patterns devised for its practical use or condemnation (depending, of course, on the moral code in place at the time).[92] Among other important functions (such as entertainment, education, and a platform for social change), Zipes argues, these forms also provide the crucial service of initiating the unconscious mind to the potential dangers of isolation — hunger, abuse, abandonment, murder — as well as the dangers of human society — rape, incest, adultery, treachery (*Why Fairy Tales Stick* 101, 131). Fairy tale narrative safely encapsulates each of these tangible dangers in the form of metaphorical symbols and figures (e.g., the wolf, the witch, the stepmother, etc.). And by taking these metaphorical forms apart, Coover brings these instinctual fears to the surface of the narrative, thereby revealing the actual horrors hidden beneath the fairy tale façade.

Similar to the splitting of the privileged signifier, the metafictional fragmentation of the metaphor reveals and establishes connections between figures and types, foregrounds the fictional artificiality of narrative patterns and structures,

[92] Zipes writes: "Every moral code in every society is constituted by the most powerful groups in a community or nation-state and serves their vested-interests." See Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick*, 131.

and, in Coover's "The Door: A Prologue of Sorts," endows the traditionally mute symbols and mystified figures of myth and fairy tale with demystifying voices of their own.[93]

In "The Door: A Prologue of Sorts," this metaphoric demystification is achieved through the characters of Jack and Granny. Coover's anti-heroic Jack, no longer a naïve boy avid at the task of chopping beanstalks to topple giants, is rendered in his decline. He is now a frustrated father wracked with paternal regret, tortured by his own past glories and the failures of a life that has led him from the heights of heroic victory to the toils of an aging woodsman:

> He swung, chanting to himself to keep his stroke steady, and he dropped those tall hard trees, but he was all too aware of what he was really doing, of what was happening up there, or about to, and how the Ogre in him wouldn't drop away and leave her free. . . . Was it envy, was that all it was? Feeling sorry, old man, that all that joy and terror is over for you, never to rise again? (*PD* 1)

To some extent, Jack takes on the familiar form of the fairy tale woodsman (an odd composite of Snow White's huntsman, Red Riding Hood's lumberjack, alloyed with fragments of L. Frank Baum's heartless Tin Woodsman) and yet there is also something unsettling about this character's fatherly anxiety. His worries about his failings as a father seem to revolve around a darker angst, the "Ogre in him," evoking the symbolic beast that lurks in the liminal margins where the clearing meets the trees (presaging the mysterious tone of "The Magic Poker," as discussed in the next section of this chapter). Barely contained, it seems, are the werewolf-like transformations and insatiable appetites of male sexuality as Jack's libidinal desires

[93] Robert Scholes makes a similar observation: "'The Door' itself is a critical mass obtained by the fusion of 'Jack the Giant-Killer,' 'Beauty and the Beast,' 'Little Red Riding hood,' and other mythic fictions. In the heavy water of this mixture there is more truth than in many surface phenomena." See Scholes, *Metafiction*, 113.

conflict with his loving parental concerns (subtly contextualizing the simmering torpor of the father figure that appears later in Coover's "The Gingerbread House," also collected in *PD*).

Coover's enrichment of the hollow figure of the fairy tale woodsman destroys the stability of the metaphor attached to that figure. By elaborating upon the metaphor of the woodsman and re-substantiating him with human wishes, worries, and his own obscure mix of proclivities, the metaphorical woodsman no longer continues to exist as a static set of narrative attributes. And following Coover's re-animation of the figure, he also can no longer be trusted to fulfill his traditional role as a guardian. In fact, little remains of the self-less, timely helper that typically abides within the metaphor of the conventional fairy tale woodsman. Instead, Coover's reader is left with a man whose intentions are no longer transparent. Even should he arrive on the scene at the expected moment, making his appointed entrance as the savior of innocence and slayer of bestial desire, his behavior might not be in line with his supposed character. Indeed, there is every reason to believe that an expression of the woodsman's own bestial desires might instead be the result.

In like fashion, the character of Granny comes across through a similar mélange of dueling metaphors, figures, and forms: at once the lovely princess and the loathly hag, youthful Belle as well as Red Riding Hood's decrepit grandmother—each feminine figure an aspect of Granny's debauched reminiscence. And like her son Jack, Granny is no less conflicted by longing and loss:

> So bless me I'm ruminatin on the old times when virtue was its own so-called reward and acquired a well-bejewelled stud in the bargain propped up there in the stale limp sheets once the scene of so much blood and beauty like I say propped up and dyin away there in my four-poster . . . and I'm wonderin where's my goodies? will I make it to the end? where's the durned kid? (*PD* 3, Coover's syntax)

Left to rot in oblivion and frustrated remembrance, her comely granddaughter on the way for a visit, poor Granny falls into a sour, sardonic reverie. Beauty aged beyond her bloom, she now finds herself on the edge of death lamenting her years spent bedded with a Beast who "never became a prince" (4). As Granny spits:

> …don't speak to me of the revelations of rebirthers and genitomancers! sing me no lumpen ballads of deoderized earths cleansed of the stink of enigma and revulsion! for I have mated with the monster my love and listened to him lap clean his lolly after . . . and the basket of goodies? is that you on the path my dear? (*PD* 4, Coover's syntax)

As with Jack, there is something very disturbing about Granny and, indeed, something altogether suspicious about the insistency of her desire for "goodies." And although there is no mention made of any wolf, like the ogre dwelling within the woodsman, the beast prowling in Granny's mind is clearly bent on release.

This release never arrives. Instead, the tale ends suspensively at the threshold, Granny's granddaughter strangely prescient of the "elaborate game, embellished with masks and poetry," that awaits her within (*PD* 6). Although many things are left hanging, this self-styled "prologue of sorts" makes one thing certain: there will be no "deoderized," Disneyfied denouement in the stories to follow—sex and death, yes; filth and complexity, yes; but never the giddy burble of a happily-ever-after.

In "The Magic Poker," Coover goes beyond this suspensive suggestion of metaphoric depth and proceeds to unearth and undermine the explosive potential of the symbolic object itself. Metafictionally framed and semiologically destabilized from the very outset, "The Magic Poker" is in many ways a deconstructive portrait of the self-reflexive narrative—a congruous piecing together of incongruous fragments,

if you will—as its act of self-begetting spontaneously mutates into metaphor, devours itself, and recedes. The tale begins:

> I wander the island, inventing it. I make a sun for it, and trees . . . . This and more: I deposit shadows and dampness, spin webs, and scatter ruins. Yes: ruins. A mansion and guest cabins and boat houses and docks . . . . All gutted and window-busted and autographed and shat upon. I impose a hot midday silence, a profound and heavy stillness. But anything can happen. (*PD* 7)

The narrator hovers above the scene, upsetting an otherwise realistic depiction of an abandoned island estate with a constant reminder of narratorial presence. Wandering, inventing, and imposing, the presence of the narrator not only serves to break down the reader's cognitive delineation between fact and fiction, the narrator's intermittent involvement also complicates the reader's diegetic placement of the narrating voice.[94] Throughout the story it never becomes clear whether the narrator should be interpreted as homodiegetic (i.e., articulated by an agent present in the world that their discourse creates), heterodiegetic (i.e., produced by an agent external to the story world), or some hybrid mixture of the two ("*alter*diegetic"?).[95] This simultaneous duality of presence and absence imbues the story with an anagogic resonance that charges the language with mutative potential and truly activates the narrator's statement that "anything can happen." For whatever the narrator chooses

[94] Kathryn Hume makes a similar observation in, "Robert Coover's Fiction: The Naked and the Mythic*," NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 12.2 (1979): 147, see also E. B. Weinstock, "Robert Coover-'The Babysitter': An Observation on Experimental Writing," *Style*, 9 (1975): 387.

[95] In her *A Rhetoric of the* Unreal, Christine Brooke-Rose proffers an addition to these categories of narration: ". . . I suggest *alter*diegetic, (an observer tells the story, mainly of someone else), to distinguish it from the Greek *hetero-* of the wider 'narrator absent' category" (n.33, 413). In the context of Coover's fiction, Brooke-Rose's parenthetical "mainly" is crucial as it allows for a significant movement of narrative voice and, thereby, an expansion of narratorial agency (a point that will be returned to later in the chapter), see Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative & Structure, Especially of the Fantastic* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981): 311-38. For an in-depth analysis of these forms of narration and their relationship to the postmodern literary process, see also Brian Richardson, "Voice and Narration in Postmodern Drama" *New Literary History* 32.3 (2001): 682.

to say or do—literally, in every sense—*becomes* the narrative unfolding before the reader.

The setting now conjured up and the parameters of the story's diegetic dynamism in place, the tale's intrusive narrator introduces the enchanted object:

> Bedded deep in the grass . . . lies a wrought-iron poker. It is long and slender with an intricately worked handle, and it is orange with rust. It lies shadowed, not by trees, but by the grass that has grown up wildly around it. I put it there. (*PD* 8)

Thus introduced, the poker instantly becomes ripe with significance and metaphoric potential. However, in direct contrast to Neil Schmitz's analysis in "Robert Coover and the Hazards of Metafiction," which describes the emphatic artificiality of this passage as draining the poker of its magic,[96] the narrator's insistence upon the artificiality of the poker brings the item into a focus which, if anything, repeatedly reminds the reader of its enchanted nature (the qualifier in the story's title being the first hint) and, thereby, setting up an air of suspense around it. The narrator's focus upon this item does not, however, necessarily beg the question of the poker's ontological relevance, as Schmitz argues (215). The "how" of its creation has already been established—it has been narrated into its position (whatever position that might be). Instead, the rather more pertinent problems of the poker's epistemological relevance—the "why" of its being there and the "what" of its potential agency—are more central to the story's development.

To draw an analogy, the reader of Arthurian legend does not ask "how" Merlin casts the sword in stone (the only valid answer being an echo of Coover's

[96] It is this sense of magic that, according to Schmitz, Coover spends the rest of the story attempting to re-establish: "Coover thus begins by confessing that his poker is a literary artifact ('I put it there'). So described, it is without magic. . . . Coover strives to restore magic to the symbol, to make it strike the imagination once more with resonance . . ." See Schmitz, "Robert Coover and the Hazards of Metafiction," 215.

narrator: *it's magic, anything can happen*), instead the reader's curiosity is aroused by what will occur when the sword is finally plucked from the stone. Likewise with the poker, the reader must inevitably accept the bizarre conditions of the poker's metafictional genesis and focus his/her curiosity on what magic qualities the poker might possibly possess and who is to unlock these qualities.

The reader doesn't have to wait long for an answer. For into this neglected wonderland arrive two young women: Karen and her sister, the "girl in gold pants" (a metaphor which in itself seems to hint at the invention of a new typological nominative: "Goldie Pants"). It is the latter who first discovers the poker while following Karen through the woods. This "girl in gold pants," in typical fairy tale fashion, is suddenly presented with a choice of two paths:

> Which way around? To the left it is dark, to the right sunny: she chooses the sunny side and there, not far from the path, comes upon a wrought-iron poker, long and slender with an intricately worked handle. She bends low, her golden haunches gleaming over the grass: how beautiful it is! On a strange impulse, she kisses it – POOF! before her stands a tall slender man, handsome, dressed in dark slacks, white turtleneck shirt, and jacket, smoking a pipe. He smiles down at her. 'Thank you,' he says, and takes her hand. (*PD* 11)

Like Arthur's Excalibur, the wrought-iron poker fulfils its magic promise on the first attempt, miraculously transforming. This scenario isn't allowed to develop any further, however, for as soon as the poker is allowed to release its magic the narrator hits the narrative pause button, so to speak, rewinds, and this transformation is retracted.

In the next paragraph the discovery of the object is made again. The girl crouches to examine a wrought-iron poker bedded in the grass, her golden pants glowing radiantly:

> ‘Oh!’ she says softly. ‘How strange! How beautiful!’ Squeamishly, she touches it, grips it, picks it up, turns it over. Not so rusty on the underside – but bugs! *millions* of them! She drops the thing, shudders, stands, wipes her hand several times on her pants, shudders again. (*PD* 11, Coover’s emphasis)

Switching abruptly from dream to nightmare, the poker’s identity as an enchanted object is thrown into confusion—a confusion that continually builds with each successive appearance.

After this incident with the bugs, the subsequent discovery of the poker again garners a kiss, several in fact. But only after repeated attempts does the transformation take place (12). In another episode the kisses are ineffective, “Nothing happens. Only a rotten taste in her mouth. Something is wrong” (12). And as the narrative jolts along from one scene to the next, the poker becomes a pipe (*ceci n'est pas une pipe*?), a walking stick, a rifle, a piano leg, a sex toy, and a baseball bat (*PD* 21-23). No longer a stable metaphor with a clear narrative function, the poker instantly becomes a metaphor for absolutely anything.

During one incarnation the handsome prince figure even takes this line of thought to its inevitable conclusion—in the metafictional world, everything is potentially a metaphor for everything (even itself). As prince implies after thanking the “girl in gold pants” for the transformative kiss and apologizing for the foul taste of the poker:

> ‘What momentary bitterness I might have suffered,’ she responds, ‘has been more than indemnified by the sweetness of your disenchantment.’ ‘My disenchantment? Oh no, my dear, there *are* no disenchantments, merely progressions and styles of possession. To exist is to be spell-bound.’ (*PD* 16, Coover’s emphasis)

And if existence is an enchantment (an anagogic captivation), Coover implies, then language is the spell.

This spell, an imaginative weaving together of experience and artifice, is always a semiological progression from one state to another — from sense to sound, signified to signifier — and back again in an endless cycle of impression and expression. Just as the sign *poker* is not, except in a purely imaginary sense, an actual, physical poker (the sign merely acting as a doorway between phenomenon and phonology), the same sort of enchanted, imaginary connection applies to the structure of the metaphor. Only, in the case of the metaphor, the imagined connection is one of similarity and additive meaning — a blending of sign and sign, the one taking on and/or supplementing the attributes of the other. As the context of the similarity is shifted, the additive meaning is also shifted ("a pen is a sword" having a very different symbolic composition than "a pen is a bird," for example). When this potential for meaningful similarity is made to appear arbitrary or is shown to take on the additive meaning of multiple or contradictory "styles of possession," as in the case of Coover's poker, the metaphor no longer continues to function as a stable metaphor. The result is the transformation of the symbolic poker into an empty signifier, a linguistic prop that takes on whatever significance it is given relative to the context of its appropriation.

By compromising the integrity of the poker's metaphorical content, the reader is repeatedly kicked out of the story world, reminded of its fictional artificiality, and dissuaded from assigning any stable meaning to the metaphor. However, as the poker loses its semiotic stability within the narrative, it takes on a higher level of symbolic possibility for the reader, essentially becoming a magic item for the reader to discover and unlock, the characters assuming at random the role of keys to ostensible incarnations. Here Schmitz's analysis is to the point:

> Narrative lines helically converge upon the poker as symbol which fuses the time and mode of each line. We see the fragments as interrupted only because the symbol itself, the center, is turned. At every turn, every approach, it generates schemes of consciousness that invariably fail to be conclusive. ("Robert Coover and the Hazards of Metafiction" 215)

The comfortable relationship between the character's narrated experience and the reader's experience of the narration is disconnected. Through the narrator's world-bending interruptions in time and metaphorical content, the reader (like the Unwilling Participant in "The Panel Game") is swept along, caught in the capricious currents of the story's fluidity. Whereas the characters experience one reality after another without memory (each subsequent reality essentially dissolving into the next), the reader is conscious of the shifts taking place and aware of the levels of metaphoric meaning building up, replacing, augmenting, contradicting each new direction. As Schmitz writes, "The result is the shimmering of imaginative reality, a collocation of possibilities in which the historical realm of fact exists, but only as a thin surface" (215). And yet, even this "thin surface" of historical fact fails to maintain its stability as the narrator insinuates the island into reality before disappearing completely:

> I look on the map: yes, there's Rainy Lake, there's Jackfish Island. Who invented this map? Well, I must have, surely. . . . Yes, and perhaps tomorrow I will invent Chicago and Jesus Christ and the history of the moon. Just as I have invented you, dear reader, while lying here in the afternoon sun, bedded deeply in the bluegreen grass like an old iron poker . . . . (*PD* 25-26)

Finally the story spins through a set of possible conclusions as the entire narrative system disappears into the poker like the collapse of some vast morphological sun—the island and its brief inhabitants (not to mention the reader, Jesus Christ, et al.)

caught in the paradoxical singularity of a metaphor so empty and so dense that it not only swallows itself, it swallows the known universe along with it.

Along parallel lines, Jorge Luis Borges conceives a similar metafictional cosmology in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (1940; collected in *Ficciones*, 1962), Borges's well-known historico-journalistic depiction of an illusory world that spontaneously appears in the world of fact.[97] Among the many problems and paradoxes that confront the reader of this work, Borges's tale intimates that reality (especially any narrative reality pretending to mirror or represent a version of extratextual reality) is little more than a convergence of "hrönir," artifacts imagining themselves in and out of being.[98] Like Coover's poker, these "Tlönian" artifacts are not only self-generative, they are also infinitely re-generative, caught in the endless loop of a search for (and complication of) their own perfection:

> One curious fact: the *hrönir* of the second and third degree – that is, the *hrönir* derived from another *hrön*, and the *hrönir* derived from the *hrön* of a *hrön* – exaggerate the flaws of the original; those of the fifth degree are almost uniform; those of the ninth can be confused with those of the second; and those of the eleventh degree have a purity of form which the originals do not possess. The process is a recurrent one; a *hrön* of the twelfth degree begins to deteriorate in quality. (*Ficciones* 30, Borges's emphasis)

In like fashion Coover's poker repeats and perverts its own synthesis. It resembles itself, assembles and re-assembles itself, transmogrifies, becomes its own opposite, and even, at one point in the story, inserts itself into a pseudo-mythical lore of its own design (*PD* 27-29). Seeming in many ways to take the genetic pattern of

[97] This alternative world creation, or what Brian McHale refers to in *Postmodernist Fiction* as "the tension between paramount reality and subuniverses of meaning" (20), runs through many of Coover's novels and stories; the first two of his novels, *The Origin of the Brunists* (1965) and *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* (1968), being the most in-depth explorations of this artificial construction of personal/private realities. See McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 19-21.

[98] See Borges, *Ficciones*, 29-30, 33.

Borges's "hrönir" as an embedded structural template, Coover's poker pokes and protrudes from and into the liminal margins of historical time, its becoming immediately preceded by its having already become in a process of overlapping concurrence and repetitive differentiation.

Stylistic Re-Structuring

It is precisely this subversive process of repetitive differentiation that complicates readings of Coover's metafiction, such as Christine Brooke-Rose's approach in *A Rhetoric of the Unreal,* which attempt to fit Coover's writing under the heading of stylization (364-89). Though Brooke-Rose is somewhat reticent in her use of examples, she firmly assigns Coover to the category of "narrative stylist," insisting that his mimetic repetition of precedent forms—far from involving any type of parodic narrative subversion—borders on the direct imitation of these same forms (366). In Brooke-Rose's assessment, Coover's work comes across as tantamount to a kind of postmodern ventriloquism.[99] As she writes in her chapter entitled, "Metafiction and surfiction: a simpler formal approach":

> Coover is concerned with history and our constant reinterpretation of it (though of course his over-interpretation of it is yet another interpretation). . . . One can see him moving from both traditional and parodic representation of contemporary problems to stylisation, and in his short stories . . . he moved over entirely to stylisation. (*A Rhetoric of the Unreal* 366)

Although it never becomes entirely clear what Brooke-Rose intends by her use of the term "stylisation" (her own analysis eventually becoming indistinguishable from that

[99] Although the categorization of Coover's fiction under the heading of "stylization" is a tenuous one at best, certain of his later works (e.g., *Briar Rose* [1996], *Ghost Town* [1998], S*tepmother* [2004]) do rely heavily upon tropes of mimicry and formal imitation – albeit in a highly ironized, blatantly parodic format. Perhaps only *Noir* (2010) could be considered as fitting the questionably parodic, stylistic paradigm that Brooke-Rose advances in *A Rhetoric of the Unreal* (364-89).

of Olga Scherer's 1979 study of stylization in the works of William H. Gass, which she cites extensively),[100] nevertheless, she seems to be making a distinction between long-form and short-form metafictional parody (373-74). While making a case for long-form, novelistic parody (similar to the variety being advanced here) within the works of writers such as Thomas Pynchon, John Fowles, and Ishmael Reed, Brooke-Rose's analysis relegates the short fictions of Barth, Barthelme, and Coover to the region of false parody, or "stylisation" (a distinction which in many ways predicts Fredric Jameson's similar thesis concerning postmodern pastiche).[101] Brooke-Rose continues to argue that this "stylisation" effectively amounts to an imitative narrative that also manages to stylize the reader's interpretive process. The result, she indicates, is a multiply-stylized narrative that, "is in a sense double, for the other model [of the stylisation] is the very process of reading" (372). Not only does this assessment needlessly complicate her supposedly "simple formal approach," it also makes her argument of short-form metafiction as direct narrative imitation a very difficult position to support.[102] And considering the "double" nature that Brooke-Rose apparently recognizes in short-form metafiction (which is, terminology excepted, actually quite similar to the assessment of high ironic parody as it is presented in the first chapter of this dissertation — i.e., parody upon parody), one

[100] Olga Scherer's study, which is somewhat less vague than Brooke-Rose's in its terminology, does make some interesting distinctions between what Scherer calls "qualitative" and "quantitative" stylization (the former related to reiteration, the latter to imitation). See Scherer, "La stylization," 65-85.

[101] Jameson writes: "Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists." See Jameson, *Postmodernism,* 17.

[102] In the concluding line of her subsection on "stylization," she even pretends a dismissive ambivalence towards this position: "But such imaginings are 'schemas,' anathema to these writers, which is why I don't dare draw it, but give it discursively, that it might get lost" (*A Rhetoric of the Unreal* 385).

can't help but question this theory of a stylization of the creative act compounded with a stylization of literary models without appealing to parody as a narrative mechanism.

Further, in an attempt to define the parameters of metafiction and account for its contradictory currents, Brooke-Rose's stylistic analysis seems to dismantle the very structure of parody. Her argument opposes the repetition of precedent narrative structures, the mimicry of compositional style(s) and the parodic tendency toward imitation ("stylisations of literary models") against the satirical and/or ludic ends of postmodern parody ("stylisation of the writer's creative act") (373-74). This opposition not only defuses the inherent tension of metafictional narrative, it also defuses the concept of parody in the process. Furthermore, in her splitting of parody into its constituent parts, the critically self-reflexive aspect of parody is lost completely—arguably the *raison d'être* of ironic narrative. Following Brooke-Rose's analysis to its conclusion, all one is left with is a weak form of ingenuous comedy on the one hand, and a naïve repetition of precedent narrative forms on the other.

That this is an untenable appraisal should be obvious to the reader of Coover, especially in the light of the above reading of "The Magic Poker." However, the question of stylization versus parody within metafiction is not without its importance. Brooke-Rose's analysis is a useful reminder that stylization is crucial to the parodic process. In fact, it is often the means by which metafictional narrative foregrounds its own structural components, tropes, and rhetorical patterns. But whereas stylization, *qua* stylization, usually ends at the level of convention (i.e., the establishment of a familiar or stylistically reminiscent narrative environment), [103]

[103] The *OED* defines the transitive verb, "stylize," as follows: "To conform (an artistic representation)

parody turns this convention back on itself, re-contextualizes the established convention, or applies the convention in a discernably unconventional manner. As the *OED* definition of the term makes clear, parody always involves some kind of interference with style and/or convention:

> A literary composition modeled on and imitating another work, *esp.* a composition in which the characteristic style and themes of a particular author or genre are satirized by being applied to inappropriate or unlikely subjects, or are otherwise exaggerated for comic effect. ("Parody")

While this definition places a significant emphasis upon the imitative aspect of the stylization, the key difference between parody and stylization is precisely that, *the difference*, or, as it was phrased earlier, the repetitive differentiation.

Like rhetorical irony, parody exists within this disjunction of medium and message (it shows its own "seams," as Brian McHale might put it).[104] At some point during the text it becomes apparent to the reader that the style of the narrative, its linguistic content, and its context fail to completely agree. Something is inappropriately placed (e.g., a barber's basin on one's head), exaggerated (e.g., Irish babies as a snack), or contextually out of joint (e.g., philosophizing spermatozoa). Often the narrative leaves a trail of clues along the way so as to tip-off the discerning reader as to the parody taking place (typical in the works of Nabokov, Pynchon, Acker, and Barth), other times the disconnection is so obvious that clues are unnecessary (as is common in the works of Katz, Brautigan, Vonnegut, Reed, and Barthelme), and in highly sophisticated works of parody the duplicity of the stylistic mechanism is such that the parody only ever manifests as a pervasive, yet ultimately

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to the rules of a conventional style; to conventionalize." See "Stylize," *OED*, Second edition, 1989; online version December 2011.

[104] In *Postmodern Fiction*, McHale writes: "Postmodern fiction . . . seeks to foreground this seam by making the transition from one realm to the other as jarring as possible" (90).

unanswerable ironic doubt (as in certain works by Borges, Beckett, DeLillo, and Gass).

Although the fictional works of Robert Coover might be said to include each of these techniques (a statement which also holds true for each of the authors above), it is perhaps in the first category — the clue-strewn parodic trail — where Coover's parody is most often located. This is especially true of the "Seven Exemplary Fictions" section of *PD*. While Brooke-Rose finds these works, specifically, to be "clear stylisations of literary models" (373), it is readily apparent that the stylization going on in these stories is transparent. Rather than imitating a given convention in an attempt to trick the reader (a dubious proposition at best) or mimic a specific genre for no other purpose than mimicry (which is just as dubious), Coover's stylization serves to actively focus the reader's attention on the ironic disconnections going on in the narrative.

Coover's technique of stylistic re-structuring (as introduced earlier in the chapter) represents a parodic re-interpretation and/or over-interpretation of familiar narrative patterns. As Coover explains in the foreword to his "Seven Exemplary Fictions" (fittingly addressed to Cervantes), these parodic interpretations are aimed "as a weapon against the fringe-areas of our consciousness, and as a mythic reinforcement of our tenuous grip on reality" (*PD* 61). Coover continues:

> The novelist uses familiar mythic or historical forms to combat the content of those forms and to conduct the reader (*lector amantísimo!*) to the real, away from mystification to clarification, away from magic to maturity, away from mystery to revelation. And it is above all to the need for new modes of perception and fictional forms able to encompass them that I, barber's basin on my head, address these stories. (*PD* 61)

Like Cervantes's project in his *Novelas Ejemplares* (1613), Coover's project is one of innovation within renovation, debunking myth through an immersion in myth, fighting form with form and content with new context. This "combat" with the content of form, as discussed previously, involves an attack on the metaphorical shell encasing the fragile human drama hidden beneath. The unfolding of this drama, as in Cervantes's collection, involves the reader directly with questions of the real and the ideal, the probable and the improbable, and in so doing, creates something entirely new in the process.

In the stories "The Brother" and "J's Marriage," for example, Coover selects two well-known tales from the Christian tradition (the story of Noah's ark and the relationship of Mary and Joseph, respectively) and extrapolates, drawing inferences from the material and projecting possible conclusions into each of the narratives. Yet in no way does Coover imitate the form directly. In contrast to works such as Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, which inhabits both the style and the form of the mythic material being parodied (as discussed in the previous chapter), the interactions with myth taking place in "The Brother" and "J's Marriage" do not attempt to feign biblical diction, syntax, or typography. And yet the reader's interaction with Coover's pseudo-mythical material is just as immersive as it would have been had he attempted a more orthodox program of stylization (perhaps even more so, for the form can easily obscure the content in overly stylized parody—as is common in musical theater and cinematic parody).[105]

[105] Examples of overly stylized parody in musical theater might include *Jamaica* (1957) and *Wicked* (2003), in cinematic parody, movies such as *Don't Be a Menace to South Central While Drinking Your Juice in the Hood* (1996), *Kick Ass* (2010), and *Your Highness* (2011), and animated (and/or semi-animated) productions might include *Shrek* (2001) and *Enchanted* (2007). Each of these productions end up becoming the very thing they begin (or *pretend* to begin) as a parody of.

Although Coover's metafictional interactions with myth vary greatly from novel to novel and story to story, "The Brother" and "J's Marriage" both share a common adherence to the structural integrity of the source material. In these tales the frame tale containing the metaphor is taken as a unit and the central plot structure of the metaphor remains intact. By leaving the central components of the plot in place (like the trappings and scenery of a deserted stage), the gaps in the original narration and subsidiary details of the frame tale can be elaborated upon and/or invented outright (e.g., the names and biographies of incidental characters, the psychology of the lead protagonists, historical correlations, socio-political and/or sexual subtexts, etc.). Through this process the context of the central metaphor is opened up for re-interpretation.

"The Brother," for example, begins *in media res* and takes the form of an unpunctuated, stream-of-consciousness account of the labors incurred during the construction of Noah's ark (Gen: 6-9; *The Holy Bible: The Old Testament* 5-7). In Coover's version, the biblical use of the imperfect tense, the oblique switches from active to passive to middle voice, and the archaic verbal jolts in mood from the indicative to the subjunctive (all familiar grammatical aspects of the *Old Testament* narrative style) are absorbed and transformed into a barrage of Midwestern American hick-speak. And yet this idiomatic transposition doesn't seem forced or stylistically discordant. In fact, the re-setting of the discourse to within the milieu of some pseudo-biblical, Midwestern rural farmland fits the tale incredibly well and acts to re-contextualize the narrative into an almost parallel idiomatic environment.

This re-contextualization, however, does not contemporize the tale in any way. As described in the preliminary analysis of Barthelme's *Snow White* (in chapter

one), the high ironic shift from one word-world to another is never simply a lifting and setting down into a new temporal setting. As in Barthelme's novel, the textual environment of Coover's "The Brother" is a hybrid — a mixture of mythic incident and modern diction existing in a purely fictionalized world. And although the tale does offer a perspective on the events that could conceivably be termed a more "realistic" account (due to its Americanized language, a scattering of modern terms, and a narration which, in contrast to the *Old Testament* episode, has a discernable source), such a reading is problematic in that the scope of Coover's narrative does not venture very far beyond what is already patterned in the biblical source material and certainly does not describe a common order of experience. But the crucial difference, as in all high ironic parody, exists in what is being displaced through the narration.

The story's first-person narrator, immediately revealed to be Noah's brother, relates the tale from the perspective of an incredulous though ultimately sympathetic sibling caught up in a series of events beyond his comprehension. Though he aids Noah in the building of the ark, he mocks the ridiculous nature of the task and takes every opportunity to belittle his brother for the insanity he sees in building a boat at the top of a hill:

> . . . God knows how *he* ever found out to build a damn boat lost in *his* fog where he is Lord he was twenty when I was born and the first thing I remember was havin to lead him around so he didn't get kicked by a damn mule him who couldn't never do nothing in a normal way just a huge over size fuzzyface boy . . . (*PD* 75, Coover's emphasis and syntax)

The brother's undoing, it becomes apparent, is his blind adherence to a set of rational notions that render him incapable of relating to Noah's epiphantic calling. Like the "human wickedness" that ostensibly brings the flood (Gen. 6:5; *The Holy Bible: The*

Old Testament 5), the brother's pragmatic rationality is implied as the *hamartia* that results in his destruction. The irony of this situation exists in the fact that the only alternative to the brother's rationality is an equally blind obedience—an obedience that, as the passage above makes clear, comes across as equivalent to mental retardation.

Ultimately incapable of communicating with each other, Noah abandons his brother and leaves him to drown. And like Noah's brother, the reader, too, is left stranded. Waters rising, boat lost on the horizon, the reader is caught in the double-bind, meta-allegory of Noah's idiotic zealotry on the one hand and the brother's nihilistic rationalism on the other. In many ways reminiscent of the absurd collapse of reason that occurs at the close of "Panel Game," this tale also concludes as a searing indictment of the human condition, damning in equal terms both the religious (onto-theological) and rational (epistemological) impulses.

While most of the biblical elements have been maneuvered to the margins of the tale (or paraphrased into submission), the removal of the authoritative voice of the divine does little to upset the bizarre nature of the events.[106] On the contrary, the events take on a terrifyingly surreal sense of suspensive possibility — the real and the impossible engaged in open combat throughout the course of the tale. And though the impossible always seems to have the upper hand, the urgency of Coover's attack upon the "unconscious mythic residue" (*PD* 60) contained in such pervasive mythic forms critically alters the reader's perception of the myth and the motivations

[106] As McCaffery notes: "Because we know what will follow, our reaction to even the humourously reported scenes is strained; certainly the fact that there is no biblical logic provided to help justify what is happening emphasizes the human aspects of the scene and makes Noah's refusal of aid to his brother seem cruel and cold." See McCaffery, *The Metafictional Muse,* 64.

of its principle characters. By insinuating an ironic doubt into the mind of the reader, Coover's tale undermines (however slightly) the integrity of the myth.

This program of mythic attack follows a similar course in "J's Marriage." Told in an indirect style of narration, this story allows the reader an intimate glimpse into the yearnings and disappointments of the protagonist, nominally referred to simply as "J" (though the context makes it clear that the character should be taken as the biblical figure of Joseph, husband to Mary and surrogate father of Jesus). As the narrative unfolds, J recounts the circumstances surrounding his marriage, the incredible events encountered by his wife, and the conditions of their eventual failure as a couple. Incapable of getting each of the pieces to correspond, J traces and re-traces the course of his married life, anxiously searching for some way of comprehending or at least coming to terms with his baffling experiences as a husband, a father, and a man.

In many ways a "parodic forerunner of the modern existential man," as McCaffery notes in his analysis of the tale, "Joseph's bewildered and annoyed reaction to the pattern of his life gives us a new outlook on this story" (*The Metafictional Muse* 62). This revised perspective allows the narrative to propose a series of ironic solutions to questions raised (but omitted or left unanswered) in the myth. As McCaffery enumerates:

> . . . what, for example, was their sex life like after they were married? (nonexistent, except for one instance which may have been only a dream). What sort of relationship did Jesus have with Joseph? (they ignored each other). How did Joseph die? (of consumption in a tavern, his face resting in a glass of [red] wine). (*The Metafictional Muse* 62)

As these more or less prosaic issues are confronted and their circumstances elaborated upon with a tremendous subtlety of detail, a picture emerges of a man

thoroughly unprepared for divine intrusion into the otherwise satisfactory affairs of his daily life.

Though by all accounts a man given to constant contemplation, nothing in his experience seems to have prepared him for the enigma of deific cuckoldry (as told in Luke 1: 26-38; *The Holy Bible: The New Testament* 53-54). As J describes:

> She explained to him simply that her pregnancy was an act of God, and he had to admit against all mandates of his reason that it must be so, but he couldn't imagine whatever had brought God to do such a useless and, well, yes, in a way, almost vulgar thing. J always thought about everything a great deal . . . and about *this*, to be sure, he thought even more that usual. (*PD* 98, Coover's emphasis)

And yet such obsessive contemplation does little to assuage the deepening bewilderment J experiences as he strives to make sense of Mary's immaculate conception:

> . . . no power of mental effort provided a meaningful answer for him; it was simply unimaginable to him that any God would so involve himself in the tedious personal affairs of this or any other human animal, so unutterably unimportant were they to each other. (*PD* 98)

Finding it beyond his meager human means to discover the significance of his wife's supernatural encounter, J allows the issue to stand, ". . . he simply gave in to it, dumped it in with the rest of life's inscrutable absurdities . . ." (98). And yet the question continues to nag him to his very dying breath. In fact, the narrative implies, it is in this final *bout de souffle* that J finally puts the pieces together into some semblance of order. Just before he expires in a fit of consumptive laughter, "he had a rather uncharacteristic thought about the time she, the wife, fell asleep, or apparently so, that morning following the wedding night" (101). What this thought might have been and whether it has any significant bearing on the strange events of J's existence (or is simply the fantasy of a desperate old man) are questions left to the speculation

of the reader. Nevertheless, one implication of this last laugh is remarkably clear. J's doubt has remained intact to the very end.

Despite the graceful subtlety of the prose, especially in comparison to the brazen, vernacular monologue of "The Brother," "J's Marriage" is perhaps the more mythically destructive of the two stories. J's eloquent surveys of his doubt and his articulation of this doubt to the reader certainly affects the theological veracity of the mythic source material. In his torturous examinations of God's liaison with his wife, J's comments cut away at the metaphor with exacting precision, bringing to the surface the latent "vulgarity" of the annunciation and the "unutterable unimportance" of man in relation to God.

Perhaps more so than Noah's brother's vitriolic rants against the illogicality of his lot, J's arguments have a persuasive cogency that lends them a certain tentative epistemological weight. Although both characters appeal for the reader's sympathy, it is easy to take the brother lightly, as a self-righteous buffoon not unlike Noah. J, on the other hand, commands a somewhat deeper sympathy. Further, J's anger (if it can be called that) is not directed outward at God, Mary, the world, etc., but inward, at his own incapacity to comprehend the seemingly incomprehensible. His inherently inquisitive nature not only critically re-interprets the events surrounding his own piece of myth, so to speak, it also serves to remove the story from its esoteric element, thereby, in Coover's words, "conduct[ing] the reader to the real, away from mystification to clarification" (*PD* 61).[107]

[107] The use of "to" in this phrase (if not taken as completely and deliberately ironic) might be more accurately replaced by "towards," as clarification and reality are destinations seldom reached in Coover's fiction.

While Schmitz claims that the "skillful tricks of interpretation," which occur in "The Brother" and "J's Marriage," actually evade the question of truth and are, therefore, reducible to "irreligious jest" ("Robert Coover" 213), this concept of truth as a category confined to the purely literal or the purely imagined is precisely what Coover's narrative debunks.[108] In setting up a tone of pervasive doubt throughout each of the "Seven Exemplary Fictions," Coover chips away at this distinction by showcasing the fact that, as a fundamentally creative act, there is no point at which fiction divorces itself from imagination. And in its assertion that the literal becomes fiction at the point of iteration, Coover's parody eloquently displays that, while literal truth may enter the realm of fiction, only imaginative truth can ever re-

emerge.

Behind this syllogism, however, lurks the fact that this supposedly fundamental imaginative truth is just as unstable as literal truth in the world of fiction. As Coover's writing makes readily apparent, what is written can be just as easily be unwritten through irony, contradiction, paradox, and doubt. Likewise, the iterating voice of the narrator (to say nothing of the inherent inadequacy and inconstancy of the author's perspective) is just as fluid in its potential to extend and/or restrict the scope of the narrative. As the previous analyses of "The Magic Poker" and "The Door" have already introduced, the teeming fecundity of the narrative act is limited only by its own artificially self-imposed constraints.

[108] It is actually quite odd that Schmitz would call for such clarity, as it is Schmitz that brings up R. P. Blackmur's analogous observation in his study of Wallace Stevens: "By attempting not to set up a tone, the tone of truth is secured for statements literally false. Fairy tales and Mother Goose use the same language. Because there is no point where the statements stop being true, they leap the gap un-noticed between literal truth and imaginative truth." Quoted in Schmitz, "Robert Coover," 213; from R. P. Blackmur, *Form and Value in Modern Poetry*, 194.

Multiplicity of Voice

In works such as "The Elevator" and "The Babysitter," Coover shows that, while these constraints only hold as much weight as they are given in the moment of their iteration, the subversion of these constraints does not necessarily lead to a disintegration of narrative. Instead, the free-form manipulation of narrative point of view that occurs in these stories effects a radical fracturing of narratorial identity. The resulting multiplicity of voice (as introduced at the beginning of the chapter) expands the possibilities of the narration beyond any singular position or narratorial perspective. Through the use of intrusive and/or unreliable narrators (such as in "The Magic Poker," "Klee Dead," and "The Milkmaid of Samaniego"),[109] as well as through the splitting of the narration into a multiplicity of narratorial positions (as in "The Door," "The Elevator" and "The Babysitter"), the typical narrative conventions of stable narratorial identity and sustained character development are problematized. Throughout the stories collected in *PD* character traits and plot tendencies are constantly threatened by erasure or the superimposition of alternative traits and tendencies. And yet, this refusal to play the identity game by the rules does not result in the end of identity construction. On the contrary, through this act of destabilization narratorial identity is expanded; it has new levels and narrative possibilities extending beyond the limits of (mono-)logical perception (as Virginia Woolf famously phrased it, "My name is Brown. Catch me if you can"; Coover takes this a step further and asks: What happens when Brown tries to catch Brown?).[110] By

[109] In "Klee Dead," Coover's narrator skirts the very issue of narratorial responsibility by eluding his own omniscient position, digressing, and ultimately refusing to perform the role of primary interpreter. A similar process occurs in "The Milkmaid of Samaniego," the narrator tinkering with and erasing details so as to display the act of narration *in situ*.
[110] Virginia Woolf, "Character in Fiction," 409.

pushing a set of narrative events to the point at which they invert and become abstract, the narratorial development of a fictional identity is opened up to myriad possibilities.

In "The Elevator" Coover shows that as the rules of the identity game are subverted and inverted during the course of the narrative, the narrator's power of action increases in proportion to the level of this abstraction. The narratorial multiplicity of "The Elevator," takes full advantage of this paradoxical relativity. And with each fracture in the continuity of the protagonist's development, the familiar "situation-transformation-situation" dynamic of narrative progression (as Robert Scholes terms it)[111] is re-cast as an indefinite progression of transformation-transformation-transformation without the possibility of any conclusive denouement. Each identity formulation, once established, simply leads to other alternative formulations, and with each transformation of character, narrator, and narrative environment, the narratorial power of action is continually expanded.

In "The Elevator" this expansion occurs on three contingent levels. Firstly, the establishment of a stable narrative progression is structurally subverted; secondly, the boundaries between the character, narrator, and narrative environment are rendered transparent through abrupt fluctuations in diegetic perspective (i.e., the story, quite literally, becomes the telling); thirdly, the fractured pieces of the narration are arranged into a self-reflexive composite of imagined events. The result is a narrative that imagines itself out of the confining, mimetic representation of "actual" events by expanding the actual to include the imagined (and the re-imagined). In so doing, the potential development of the protagonist, the narration,

[111] See Scholes, "Language, Narrative, and Anti-Narrative," 210.

and the events described are also expanded, lending the sequence an abstract, anagogic fluidity.[112] This anagogically "additive" approach to narrative (as opposed to the "subtractive" approach of traditional realist fiction, which constantly limits the narrative field to a finite set of objects, events, and interpretations) might continue indefinitely if unchecked, however, the suggestion of such an infinite field is sufficient to establish the multiplicity of voice and the expansion of narratorial agency that occur in stories such as "The Elevator" and "The Babysitter".

Structurally, "The Elevator" is divided into fifteen distinct sections or "floors" that, although more or less thematically interrelated, might be said to compete for and complicate the authority of each of the other sections. In this signifying game of variation (a concept returned to later in chapter five), the narrator of each section presents some aspect of the protagonist's relation to the elevator. As Martin, the protagonist, navigates each section, a unique set of circumstances is confronted. In the first section his curiosity leads him to the basement (106), in the second he is heckled by an abusive co-worker named Carruther (107-08), in the third he lasciviously ogles the girl operating the elevator (108), in the fourth he imagines meeting Death, incarnate, as the elevator doors open (109), and in the fifth his inability to "risk" a visit to the basement is described, thereby contradicting the content of the first section (109). As the sections progress some items begin to overlap, thematic fragments are continued or repeated, and new diegetic perspectives begin to appear.

[112] As described in greater detail later in the chapter, McCaffery likens this process (which he also locates in "The Magic Poker," "The Gingerbread House," and "The Babysitter") to a kind of narrative "cubism." See McCaffery, "Robert Coover's Cubist Fictions," 33-39.

Though at first it appears that certain events might be taken as objective accounts and others as purely imagined, the relevance of such a distinction quickly breaks down as these viewpoints continue to mutate and Martin's fantasies collide. With each level of the story's enumerated ascent, the extremity of the narration also escalates in intensity. Martin's desirous glances soon become the mad writhings of sexual abandon. Meanwhile, as Martin and the elevator operator writhe in ecstasy on the floor, the elevator plummets toward destruction (110). And in a parallel universe, Martin lashes back at his abusive colleague only to find himself with a bloody nose and broken glasses (112). And in amongst the turmoil of these proliferating subplots a god-like voice also begins to make an appearance:

> *But – ah! – the doomed, old man, the DOOMED! What are they to us, to ME? ALL! We, I love! Let their flesh sag and dewlaps tremble, let their odours offend, let their cruelty mutilate, their stupidity enchain – but let them laugh, father! FOREVER! let them cry!* (*PD* 114, Coover's emphasis)

Immediately following the emergence of this omnipotent voice, the narration leaps out of Martin's head and into the voice of some un-named heterodiegetic narrator. This external voice arrives in the penultimate section of the story and is told in the vernacular of an exaggerated, second-hand anecdote (of the dirty joke variety). The narration in this section takes the absurdity to new lengths — the main length of which is a description of Martin's five-foot, uncircumcised penis. In summary: tiring of his duties as a phallic god (oil drilling in Arabia, stopping holes in Dutch dikes, spraying crops in Italy), Martin settles for the life of an office worker. One day, while riding the elevator, Martin's "buddy," Carruther, sexually assaults the elevator operator by lifting her skirts and revealing, to everyone's surprise, that she is not wearing any underpants. This flash of bare flesh excites Martin to the extent that his

giant member rips through his clothing and smashes about inside the elevator until everyone has been knocked unconscious. The operator faints at the sight, the elevator is sent careening down the shaft, and with that, the narration abruptly trails off (116-17).

As the enormity of this hyperbolic imagery subsides (though with a few residual spasms of fantasy and apocalypticism at the beginning of the last fragment), the narration eventually returns to a calm, third-person equilibrium in the final section of the story. Rather than taking the elevator, as is Martin's routine, "a strange premonition" convinces him to take the stairs instead:

> Halfway up, he hears the elevator hurtle by him and then the splintering crash from below. He hesitates, poised on the stair. Inscrutable is the word he finally settles upon. He pronounces it aloud, smiles faintly, sadly, somewhat wearily, then continues his tedious climb, pausing from time to time to stare back down the stairs behind him. (*PD* 117)

Clearly, the word "inscrutable" does little to elucidate the bizarre nature of the events leading up to this anti-climax. And yet, it would be a misreading to take this final section as a return to some universal, objective reality. As McCaffery writes:

> Although at the end of "The Elevator" Martin decides not to take the elevator trip at all, we should not assume that the other sequences were all fantasies, daydreamed by Martin as he actually stands before the elevator. . . . Each of the events within the story's "set" is equally real – or fictional – for every sequence creates its own reality as it is presented. (*The Metafictional Muse* 75-76)

While each progressive "reality" augments and/or negates the previous in a sequence of constant transformation, the narrative's ascending numerical chronology manages to hold this narrative "set" together as a whole (a structure which Coover also explores in "The Gingerbread House" and similar to Donald Barthelme's numerical progression in "The Glass Mountain" [1970], as well as Joyce Carol Oates's "29

Inventions" [1970]).[113] This numerical chronology not only mirrors the mounting intensity of each sequential fragment and corresponds to the "floor" component of the story's central metaphor (especially in its vertical arrangement of events), it is also a potential clue to the decoding of the parody taking place.

On one level, the story can be taken as a parodic inversion of Dante's travels through hell in the first book of *The Divine Comedy*, a reading reinforced by Martin's comments in the first section:

> . . . Martin imagines suddenly that he is descending into hell. *Tra la perduta gente*, yes! A mild shudder shakes him. Yet, Martin decides firmly, would that it were so. . . . Martin smiles inwardly at himself, presses the number '14'. 'Come on, old Charon,' he declaims broadly, Hell's the other way!' (*PD* 106, Coover's emphasis)

And like the circles of hell described in Dante's *Inferno,* each section of "The Elevator" steadily increases in extremity as the structure nears the *conjunctio oppositorum* of the last demonic ring.[114] Another possible clue is the stairway leading away from the scene of the elevator's annihilation, recalling Dante's ascent from Beelzebub's entombment in the thirty-fourth canto. But, instead of parodically re-appropriating the nine circles of suffering as described by Dante (which Coover could just as easily have done), the fifteen levels described in Coover's version of hell appear to be a parodic conflation of the "fifteen sins of the flesh" as enumerated

[113] In "29 Inventions" (a story, incidentally, dedicated to Coover and in many ways a mixture of the techniques employed in his "The Magic Poker" and "The Elevator") Oates also includes characters, events, and even elevators at risk of constant re-invention and/or erasure. As exemplified in the following passage: "Yes, I will erase Dr. Geddes too. It is a failure, our love. It didn't happen. No elevator; we always took the stairs, chastely. I will erase him too." See Oates, "29 Inventions," 390.

[114] Frye relates this section of Dante's *Inferno* to the "demonic epiphany" of tragic irony: ". . . the dark tower and prison of endless pain . . . or, with a more erudite irony, the *tour abolie,* the goal of the quest that isn't there. . . . Tragedy and tragic irony take us into a hell of narrowing circles and culminate in some such vision of the source of all evil in a personal form." See Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism,* 238-39.

by Paul in the fifth chapter of Galatians.[115] Running a verbal gauntlet of visceral oblivion, the narrative course of "The Elevator" takes Martin on an existential tour of several of these "sins": sexual impurity, debauchery, witchcraft, hatred, discord, fits of rage, selfish ambition. The phallocentric focus of Coover's story (e.g., the phallic elevator "shaft," the vertical structure of the narrative, the pornographic imagery) also seems to support this reading, as this chapter of Galatians begins with Paul's account of God's word on circumcision and His divinely ordained penile handling procedures.[116]

However, while this parodic layering seems to establish a tentative structural integrity, this symbolic numerical correspondence ultimately fails to assist a stable interpretation of the narrative. Like the multiplicity of voice that complicates the characterization of Martin, the multiplicity of the numerical systems at play in "The Elevator" resist any kind of programmatic interpretive approach (especially when these systems are assumed to fulfill some symbolic role as a means of synthesizing the layers of narration).[117] When taken as a clue to the unraveling of the parody, the incongruity of the fourteen floors of the building and the fifteen sections of the narrative (not to mention the seven years leading up to the events and the seven or eight occupants of the elevator [107, 113]) complicates any type of definite decoding procedure because it is impossible to decide which number carries the most

[115] "The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery / idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions / and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like." See Galatians 5: 19-21; *The Holy Bible: The New Testament* 196.
[116] See Galatians 5:1-12, 6:11-15; *The Holy Bible: The New Testament* 196-97.
[117] Recalling the Valéry epigraph at the very outset of the collection*: "They therefore set me this problem of the equality of appearance and numbers*" (*PD* xv).

significance.[118] As a result, the reader must add any projected parodic correspondence to the already proliferating layers of meaning and anti-meaning.[119]

In the end, after all attempts at synthesis have been exhausted, the reader is left with a perpetual motion of mutation upon mutation. As one incarnation of Martin self-reflexively muses:

> This small room, so commonplace and so compressed, he observes with a certain melancholic satisfaction, this elevator contains them all: space, time, cause, motion, magnitude, class. Left to our own devices we would probably discover them all. . . . They stand apparently motionless, yet moving. Motion: perhaps that's all there is to it after all. Motion and the medium. Energy and the weighted particles. Force and matter. The image grips him purely. Ascent and the passive reorganization of atoms. (*PD* 109)

Like in one of Zeno's paradoxes, Martin's identity within each fragment of narrated reality is relative to the components of each fragment (i.e., space, time, cause, motion, magnitude, class, etc.). In and of themselves each of these narrated fragments is devoid of discernable origin and destination; each operates as a semi-autonomous snapshot of Martin within a semi-autonomous context. Taken individually there is no movement (as all causal relationships are fractured), but when sequentially performed by the reader these fragments of identity are imagined into a semblance of movement (like the spinning slides of a praxinoscope). The result is not so much a representation of one continuous reality, but rather a multi-voiced composite of imagined events that amount to a parody of reality. By

[118] Interestingly, the secondary criticism of "The Elevator" also displays tremendous multiplicity in the interpretation of these ironic numerical system(s). Jackson I. Cope describes the story in terms of the fourteen floors ("Robert Coover's Fictions" 101), McCaffery treats it as fifteen sections (*The Metafictional Muse* 74), William H. Gass, in his 1969 review, seems to waver between fourteen and fifteen ("Look at Me"), and in his article, "Forking Narratives," Ronald Christ somehow locates sixteen distinct pieces of narration (55).

[119] Although clearly a problematic stance, it is, perhaps, for this reason that Kathryn Hume writes: "The chief works in which Coover does not accept such mythic structuring are those in which he deliberately denies it: 'The Elevator,' and 'The Babysitter'." See Hume, "Robert Coover's Fiction: The Naked and the Mythic," 134.

repeatedly "reorganizing the atoms" of Martin's reality, any kind of developmental narrative continuity is short-circuited, his identity is revealed to be artificial and arbitrary, and the reader is reminded of the purely fictional nature of the process.

This purposive subversion of developmental characterization and representational verisimilitude upsets the fictional projection of life-like characters inhabiting life-like worlds, but it also expands the narrator's power of action by emphasizing the fundamentally discursive nature of fiction. As Mas'ud Zavarzadeh explains in *The Mythopoeic Reality*:

> [The] intense self-reflexiveness of metafiction is caused by the fact that the only certain reality for the metafictionalist is the reality of his own discourse; thus, his fiction turns in upon itself, transforming the process of writing into the subject of writing. The credibility of fiction, therefore, is re-established not as an illuminating commentary on life but as a metacommentary on fiction itself. (39)

The fictional forms of this high ironic, metafictional discourse are responsible only to themselves as there is no other reality to which they pretend to relate. In contrast to representational realism, journalism, scientific discourse, and nonfictional forms of narrative, all of which attempt to project and totalize extralinguistic worlds and/or phenomena, the metafictional interaction with reality is always metalinguistically mediated and self-reflexive.

According to Zavarzadeh, the metafictional approach to reality is inherently subversive because it undermines and/or intentionally confuses the distinction between the real and the fictional. Through the use of "counter-techniques" such as "two-dimensional, flat characterization, consciously contrived plots, and paralogical, non-causal, and anti-linear sequences of events" (39), the world is treated as an always already linguistically conceived and negotiated sub-category of the imagination, or, in other words, an intrinsically fictional construct. Through an

excessive "over-totalization" of experience that amounts to a "mock interpretation of the human condition," Zavarzadeh writes, "the metafictionalist accentuates the arbitrariness of uniting the elements of a disjunctive universe into a significant whole" (39). This "over-totalization," in its parodic approach to order, causality, and realistic forms of interpretation, effectively substitutes logic with paralogic, straight interpretation for ironic self-reflexivity. And through this parodic over-totalization, Zavarzadeh concludes, "the metafictionalist demonstrates the confusing multiplicity of reality and thus the naïveté involved in attempting to reach a total synthesis of life within narrative" (39-40).

As described in the above analysis of "The Elevator," this parodic over-totalization can be achieved through the use of layered narration. The result is an expanded, abstract mosaic of Martin's various (potential) identities within an artificially regulated set of conditions. But whereas the scattered layers of narration in "The Elevator" can all be traced back to some incarnation of Martin within some incarnation of the central metaphor (with the possible exception of the external voice in the fourteenth section), the metafictional world of "The Babysitter," on the other hand, uses its central metaphor as the catalyst for a comparatively far more extravagant expansion of narration and narrative.

Multiplicity of Choice

In "The Babysitter," plot lines and narratorial voices fly out in all directions, they deteriorate, blend, fall silent and fly out again. Events are described, re-described, re-re-described in a (literally) dizzying array of permutations. The multiple choice, non-linearity that confronts the reader of this story completely

upsets the assumption of a logical, causal narrative progression. Indeed, for all intents and purposes, logic and causality are strictly confined to the syntax of the story's hundred-plus fragments. And as these conflicting fragments pile up, the choice of which voice to believe/disbelieve and which plot mutation to follow/ignore becomes a non-question as all of the various voices and plots become equivalent. And yet, this process of increasing equivalency does not lead to a state of complete disorder. The entropic proliferation of voice and plot that occurs in "The Babysitter" approaches a mesmerizing verbal geometry analogous to zooming in on some kind of narrativized Mandelbrot set. And like the complex patterns of "self-similarity" that suddenly appear when fractal equations are allowed to spin towards infinity, the infinite regress of "The Babysitter" also starts with a fairly limited set of variables before exploding into a mass of involved convolutions.

The tale begins as a seemingly routine account of a teenage girl's evening gig as a babysitter. And as the scene is set and the principle characters (narrators) are introduced, it becomes clear that the girl has arrived in typical fashion to take care of two kids and a baby while their parents attend a party. Hopping about like the introductory montage of some television sit-com, the reader meets the babysitter (nameless adolescent), Harry Tucker (suburban father), Dolly Tucker (suburban mother), Jimmy and Bitsy (the kids), Jack (the boyfriend), Mark (boyfriend's buddy), and the TV (itself an ever-shifting [channel-changing] narrative voice that constantly intrudes into the events, crossing its own artificial reality with the thought-worlds of the "real" characters).[120]

[120] A structure used to similar effect by Clarence Major in his *Reflex and Bone Structure* (1974).

Rapidly switching narrators from fragment to fragment, the situation is reported from the perspective of Harry, then Jack, then the babysitter, then Jimmy, then whatever happens to be on the TV at that moment. And yet this initial switching of perspective from character to character seems more or less in keeping with the incremental development of what appears to be a fairly straightforward narrative progression. All of the fragments relate thematically and all of the narrated events give the impression of being (at least conceivably) on a unified track. However, in the sixth fragment, as Jimmy's perspective skips into Jack's perspective, the layers of perspective begin to overlap and present conflicting accounts (183).

Gradually, the layers of narration start to impose and superimpose themselves upon the events and into the narrative perspectives of the other characters. What seems to originate in a repetition of events from differing perspectives eventually becomes a differing of the events themselves. As Ronald Christ observes:

> [In narrating each event], Coover refuses to distinguish between what did happen, what was thought to have happened, what did not happen, what was imagined to have happened, and what might have happened. Each possibility is carefully, precisely narrated in sequences of separated sections, all asserted with the same seamless narrative authority… ("Forking Narratives" 55).

Indeed, all possible happenings become (in the widest, most ironic sense) *probable* happenings, as the fantasies, fears, and desires of the characters seem to materialize from imagination into "actual" occurrence. As this takes place, the more or less experiential fantasies of each character invade the thoughts and experiences of all the others, thoughts suddenly taking concrete shape and, thereby, continually shaping and re-shaping the fractured course of subsequent events.

The boyfriend's imagined sexual encounters with the babysitter (occasionally merging with the thoughts of his friend, Mark) are later depicted as a series of "real"

encounters that run from innocent play (189), to gang rape (199-200, 209), to murder (210). Likewise, Harry Tucker's memory of the girl having taken a bath at their house during her last evening as a sitter leads to a series of actual encounters involving the bath. Harry becomes a bathroom voyeur (a scene replayed by both Jimmy and the boyfriend) (201), a bath companion (a scene which morphs from Jimmy to Harry in one telling) (194, 197, 199), and even imagines himself into a recurring sequence of "accidental" bathroom entrances during the course of the story (192, 193, 207, 208). Even the tentative fantasies of the little boy, Jimmy, become increasingly sexualized as the story progresses, his lingering glances turning to lecherous peepings and his tickles to aggressive gropings as his curiosity steadily turns more and more desirous (185, 188, 191, 192).

While any kind of definitive reading of this story is complicated by the intense complexity of Coover's layering technique (one critic even likening an attempt to trace the various voices, plots, and narrative permutations to the reconstruction of a scrambled egg),[121] there is one unifying thread which weaves throughout each of the libidinally super-charged fragments: each of the male characters' quest for carnal knowledge. And like the Sphinx at the Theban delta that held both the riddle of life and the key to death, Jimmy, Jack, and Harry (the Oedipal trilogy of four, two, and three — infancy, virility, and impotence), look to the "delta" of the babysitter (another un-named guardian) as an oracle and gateway to the infinite.

[121] Ronald Christ writes: "One way to read 'The Babysitter' is to break it up into constituent sequences. (Such a reading would be practiced, I suppose, by people who unscramble their eggs before eating them.) Another way to read the story is to hear all the fictional possibilities as exactly that—fictional—and therefore not contradictory to anything at all…." See Christ, "Forking Narratives," 55.

As the as final purveyor of meaning, the reader of this story is also implicated in this ironic quest for carnal knowledge. Indeed, the search for a direct interpretive angle on the events becomes a participative, prurient interest in the eventual outcome: will any of these perverse heroes actually penetrate the mystery, so to speak, cross the threshold, and come to some knowledge (in the Biblical sense, of course) of the mundane mystery that the Sphinx-like babysitter alone holds secreted away in her sublime anonymity? Or will theirs be a little death of another kind?

The answer, as one might expect, is both yes and no, all and nothing. In one possible ending, the babysitter has been raped and drowned, the children murdered, and the boyfriend left in need of a (meaning drenched) cigarette (212). Yet, in the next fragment, the reader finds the babysitter awaking from the wonderland of a nap in front of the television, the Tuckers having returned, the children asleep, the dishes washed, the whole thing implied as a dream (212). And while it is a version of the darker ending that the story closes with, even this finality is anything but absolute. As Dolly Tucker, dumbfounded by the extremity of the foregoing events, nonchalantly suggests in the last lines of the story: "Hell, *I* don't know . . . . Let's see what's on the late late movie" (212, Coover's emphasis). Every possibility made real and every reality made possible, the reader is rendered equally bewildered by this violently twisting Möbius strip of narrative ambiguity. Even once the participative whirlwind of "The Babysitter" lurches to a halt and the lines of the narrative finally cease their proliferation, the reader is no closer to unravelling the twisted, narratorial knot.

Rather than leading the reader out of this miasma of multiplicity, Coover's approach to narrative in stories such as "The Elevator" and "The Babysitter"—

indeed, in all of the stories collected in *PD*—actively immerses the reader into what he refers to as "the drama of cognition." As Coover explains:

> The drama of cognition belongs to all forms of mental acts, including those of scholarship and research—indeed that of growing up itself—though in its more dramatic forms, it is especially relevant to storytelling. It is a going from unknowing to knowing, and this process is often what shapes plots. Certainly it's how jokes work. My personal such drama lies always in the effort, through immersion in the central metaphor, to grasp a story's full potential. What is often seen as hypertextual or nonlinear in my writing is this effort to explore the whole. ("An Interview with Robert Coover")

While this immersion in the central metaphor certainly leads the reader into the "drama of cognition," in Coover's works the movement from "unknowing to knowing" is complicated by the fact that any final knowledge or conclusive understanding is precluded by the very terms of the reader's immersion. For, Coover's narrative does not proceed in balanced half-measures or minimalisms, it is a full fictional engulfment. However, as Coover's statement clearly indicates (and the stories in *PD* exemplify), experience is not grounded upon a finality of understanding, but upon the search for greater understanding and further experience. In the service of making the reader more aware of his/her own experiential "drama of cognition," Coover's metaphorical immersions are always an effort to open and allow the reader access to every aspect of that metaphor, not to forward the reader some absolute version of it, but to involve the reader in a more thorough experience of that metaphor's potential — what it might also mean, contain, and/or reveal if looked at from a variety of perspectives.

In his approach to this impulse in Coover's fiction, McCaffery draws an analogy to the cubist technique of formal manipulation and the fracturing of perspective. McCaffery writes:

> Coover forces his audience to deal with the elements of his works as mere artifacts or conventions and creates a deliberate ambiguity of event which directly parallels the cubists' spatial ambiguity and which confounds his audience's desire for outer referents. (*The Metafictional Muse* 72)

Comparable to the cubists' departures from mimetic representation, spatial illusionism, and one-point perspective, Coover's "relativistic view" presents a fragmented vision of the world and its processes in order to, as McCaffery puts it, "create realities whose ambiguities suggest something of our own relationship to the world" (72-73). In a sense, Coover's project is one of capturing a fuller slice of human experience through an expanded range of complementary and contradictory realities.

This expanded, cubistic range of realities also recalls Milorad Pavić's theory of "reversible literature." As Pavić describes in his essay, "The Beginning of the End of Reading—The Beginning and the End of the Novel":

> Some arts are reversible and enable the recipient to approach the work from various sides, or even go around it and have a good look at it, changing the spot of the perspective, and the direction of his looking at it according to his own preference, as is the case with architecture, sculpture, or painting. Other, nonreversible arts, such as music and literature, look like one-way roads on which everything moves from the beginning to the end, from birth to death. I have always wished to make literature, which is a nonreversible art, a reversible one. Therefore, my novels have no end in the classical meaning of the word. (142-43)

Coover clearly puts Pavić's theory into practice in *PD* and, in so doing, moves beyond the "one-way roads" of linear narrative development and tidy closure. Through his explorations of the multi-faceted interiors of metaphor and the irresolvable indeterminacies of the meaning-making process, Coover's high ironic metafiction pushes the reader into reversible readings and even reversals of the texts themselves. Like Pavić's multi-dimensional literature, Coover's multi-parodic

writing invites and even, quite frequently, requires the reader's imaginative participation.

Similar in ironic degree to Barthelme's investigations of the collage aesthetic and his pseudo-aleatoric blendings of figment and fragment (as explored in the following chapter), Coover's approach to narrative in *PD* also takes literature to the breaking point and discovers new levels of meaning among the fractured forms. Through these fractured forms and infinitely parodic levels of meaning, Coover, too, like *el Maestro, al gran don Miguel Saavedra*, to whom the collection is dedicated (59), teaches by comic example, "…that great narratives remain meaningful through time as a language-medium between generations, as a weapon against the fringe-areas of our consciousness, and as a mythic reinforcement of our tenuous grip on reality" (61). And as this grip grows ever more tenuous, Coover's finely-honed arsenal of meta-myths seems all the more timely, not only in their reaffirmation of the imaginative potential of fiction, but, perhaps even more importantly, in their reification of the central role of the storyteller in the expansion of human consciousness.

CHAPTER FOUR

DONALD BARTHELME: ANECDOTE, ADVENTURE, & PERFORMANCE IN THE NARRATIVE COLLAGE

Q: That's a very common fantasy.
A: All my fantasies are extremely ordinary.
Q: Does it give you pleasure?
A: A poor . . . A rather unsatisfactory . . .
[. . .]
A: But I love my irony.
Q: Does it give you pleasure?
A: A poor . . . A rather unsatisfactory . . .

--- Donald Barthelme, "Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel"
City Life, 1970

Collage Narrative: Theory, Aesthetic, and Narrative Praxis

A quiet beginning could never be claimed for the popular emergence of the collage, the works of Picasso and Braque, Duchamp and Schwitters, are far too frame-shattering for any such surmise. Nevertheless, the adoption and adaptation of collage concepts and techniques by American postmodern artists and writers during the 1960s and 70s not only expanded the collage aesthetic into new creative territory — including Joseph Cornell's experiments in architecture and film, Andy Warhol's aestheticized goods, the musical compositions of Dick Higgins, Nam June Paik's video sculpture, James Rosenquist's billboards, and Merce Cunningham's multimedia choreography — this period also witnessed an intense, explosively innovative incorporation of collage theory into the praxis of postmodern literature.

Involving an eclectic spectrum of elements from the plastic arts to poetry, from music to philosophy, writers and artists such as Laurie Anderson, Richard Brautigan, John Cage, Joseph Kosuth, Barbara Kruger, Tom Stoppard, and William

H. Gass (to name but a few) began experimenting with the radical hybridization of literary forms with other aesthetic forms, cultural processes, and methods of production. Mixing the hyper-conceptual anti-worlds of Cubism, Surrealism, and Dada with the hyper-literal word-worlds of Joyce, Beckett, and Borges, crossing the mythologic of Barthes and the bricologic of Lévi-Strauss with Wittgensteinian *cum* Derridean rules of rhetorical free-play, American artists of the 60s and 70s developed a veritable Molotov cocktail of hybrid literary forms and metafictional re-formulations: surfiction, fabulism, maximalism, bossanova, parafiction, critifiction, superfiction, and the list goes on.

While the various creative impulses, political reactions, and aesthetic agendas of the period are just as countless as they are divergent, one factor uniting each of these hybridized metafictional constructs is the subversively duplicitous nature of the collage. According to Lance Olsen, the collage narrative that emerged during this period signaled "the advent of performative critifictions dedicated to effacing, or at least deeply and richly complicating, the accepted difference between privileged and subordinate discourses" (130). Olsen continues:

> The collage imagination at the core of such a gesture is one committed to liberating juxtaposition, mosaic, conflation, fusion and confusion, Frankensteinian fictions, cyborg scripts, centaur texts, . . . narratologically amphibious writings that embrace a poetics of beautiful monstrosity. ("Notes Toward the Musicality of Creative Disjunction, Or: Fiction by Collage" 130)

And few artists have been as successful in simultaneously refining and expanding the awkwardly beautiful monstrosity of collage narrative as Donald Barthelme.[122]

[122] In fact, this "poetics of beautiful monstrosity" is precisely what Barthelme declared that he was in pursuit of. As Barthelme writes in "On 'Paraguay'" in Lawrence Rust Hills's 1974 edited collection, *Writer's Choice*: "Every writer in the country can write a beautiful sentence, or a hundred. What I am interested in is the ugly sentence that is also somehow beautiful. I agree that this is a highly

With the carnivalesque religiosity of Pieter Bruegel (the Elder), the skewed, haphazard eroticism of Max Ernst, tempered with the gritty iconoclasm of Jasper Johns, Donald Barthelme's illustrated collage narratives offer a fascinating glimpse into the turbulent, anachronistic mind of this author. As in the liminal worlds of Bruegal, Barthelme's bizarre, Menippean works inhabit the space between disparate realities, and like the fanciful relativities of Ernst, Barthelme's stories often concern the complex schism between angles of perception. Melding these qualities with what Barthelme takes from Johns, is a vision of existence that takes chaos on its own terms and finds the resounding thrum of culture in the objects that surround it, pervade it, and define it.

However, Barthelme's cut-and-paste techniques and resonant juxtapositions are not limited to the crossings of the verbal and the visual that take place within his more literally illuminated works of collage narrative (no pun intended), a similar method of collage structuring and fragmented ekphrasis went into all of Barthelme's stories and novels. It is precisely this quality in the works of Barthelme that this chapter intends to explore as this collage structure and its finely arranged tension, its multiple layers of narration, and its method of absurd ekphrasis are central to an understanding of the high ironic mode of metafiction.[123]

Beginning with an in-depth, critical analysis of a selection of Barthelme's illustrated stories, this chapter attempts to make some sense of the apparent chaos

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specialized enterprise, akin to the manufacture of merkins, say – but it's what I do. Probably I have missed the point of the literature business entirely" (Qtd. in *Not Knowing* 57). First published in *Writer's Choice*, Ed. Lawrence Rust Hills (New York: David McKay, 1974). See Barthelme, *Not Knowing: The Essays and Interviews of Donald Barthelme,* 56-57, 324.

[123] Jerome Klinkowitz proposes a similar approach to the collage aesthetic in Barthelme's fiction in the "Toward Sustained Narrative Systems" chapter of *Donald Barthelme: An Exhibition.* However, despite Klinkowitz's location of several examples of collage-like and montage-like constructs within Barthelme's oeuvre, little analysis occurs beyond the level of identification. See Klinkowitz, *Donald Barthelme: An Exhibition,* 55-78.

and offers a means of approaching the complex verbal and visual parody that takes place within Barthelme's works of collage narrative. Following the analysis of these illustrated works this chapter then considers Barthelme's *Snow White* (1967) in the light of its fragmented, highly pictorial use of language and its montage-like method of intertextual citation and literary allusion.

It is proposed that Barthelme's works of collage narrative may be arranged into three primary categories: anecdotal collections, ad hoc adventures, and onto-theatrical productions. While his illustrated works of collage narrative tend to fit, primarily, into one of these three categories, his novels favor a more varied approach and usually involve a compartmentalized synthesis of all three of these categories.[124] Following the way these categories repeatedly surface and re-surface in Barthelme's writing, these categories begin to take on the distinct quality of, if not exactly tropes, then certainly rhetorical configurations with defined entrance points and balanced, carefully-timed points of fracture. By viewing his illustrated works as pictographic word puzzles whose tragi-comic anti-solutions reveal much about the culture from which they derive their symbology, the high ironic structure of Barthelme's collage narrative becomes more comprehensible and the subversive nature of his transideological works of quotidian fantasy becomes more readily apparent.

Anecdotal Collections

In the first of these categories, his anecdotal collections, Barthelme parodically imitates and subverts the tone and style of historical narrative, scientific

[124] Although Barthelme's later novels, *Paradise* (1986) and the posthumously published *The King* (1991), also involve a number of the collage structures being discussed in this chapter, both of these novels (rather like extended short stories) tend to remain primarily within the onto-theatrical and ad hoc adventure categories, respectively, and are therefore less useful to the argument forwarded here.

discourse, and other epistemologically authoritative systems of meaning construction. Through tenuously interconnected fragments of quoted, paraphrased, and ironically deployed bits of cultural arcana, Barthelme pieces together a bizarre sequence of items that critically re-define and parodically re-appropriate the source materials from which they are composed. The resulting narrative sequence appears more like a collection of curiosities (of the "jackalope" variety) or pages from an encyclopedia of the absurd (à la Flaubert's *Le Dictionnaire des idées reçues,* 1911-13) rather than any kind of credible articulation of factual truths. In works such as "Natural History" (1971)[125] and "At The Tolstoy Museum" (1969),[126] Barthelme's ludic manipulations undermine the areas of culture they pretend to represent by juxtaposing disparate and/or altered images and pairing these collaged illustrations with explanatory notes of an obviously doubtful or ironically humourous nature.

In "Natural History," purportedly an analysis of "animalisticism, or the practice of placing too much faith in animals" (*The Teachings of Don B.*, 31; hereafter *TTDB*), the narrative begins with an account of an octopus that was, supposedly, once attached to Leonardo Da Vinci's *La Gioconda* (see figure 4). The next pairing describes the cosmology of a certain Plenus of Diphthong who was "condemned to drink the fatal KóKA KóLá" (32) for his heretical belief that the world was suspended from the jaws of a seahorse rather than balanced upon the back of a tortoise (see figure 5). And as the narrative progresses, the reader also

[125] "Natural History" was first published, in its original illustrated form, in *Harper's*, August 1971. The version referred to here is from the 1992 collection of Barthelme's works edited by Kim Herzinger. See Barthelme, *The Teachings of Don B.: Satire, Parodies, Fables, Illustrated Stories, and Plays of Donald Barthelme*, 31-36, 342.

[126] "At The Tolstoy Museum" (1969) was first published in the May 24, 1969 edition of *The New Yorker* magazine. This story was also included in Barthelme's *City Life* (1970) and was later selected as one of the two illustrated stories collected in *Forty Stories* (1987). All quotations of this story come from the 1971 Jonathan Cape edition of *City Life*. See Barthelme, *City Life,* 39-50.

encounters Lousia May Alcott and a child-eating boa constrictor (32), Archduke Maximilian of Austria and a rhino BBQ (33), Robert E. Lee and an omniscient porcupine (35), as well as the Brontë sisters' little known reliance upon a clairvoyant cat (35). And finally leading the reader back to the introductory "argument," the narrative concludes with a tiny treatise on the psychic nourishment received from the severed body parts, mythic virility, and wholesome symbology of the rabbit (36). Tour complete, the reader is left to make of these half-fictional, fully-farcical fragments what he or she will.

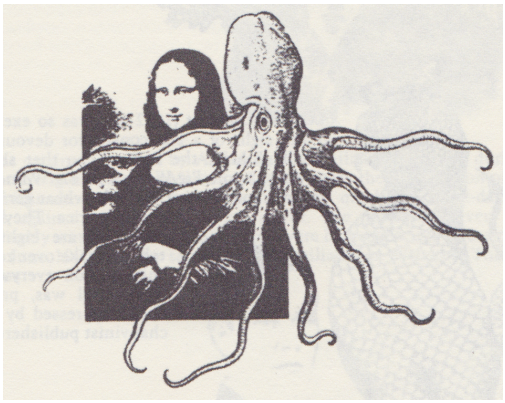

Figure 4. From "Natural History," in *The Teachings of Don B*., 31.

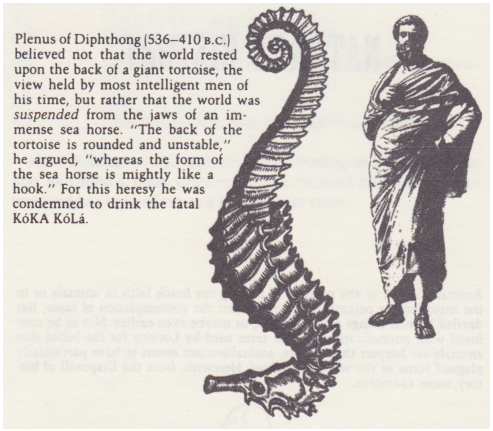

Figure 5. From "Natural History," in *The Teachings of Don B*., 32.

While these illustrated anecdotes are clearly playful and this ironic play provides ample clues to the decoding of the parody, Barthelme's play also involves an aggressive disruption of privileged epistemological discourse and the authoritative language and rhetoric that supports such discourse. By interspersing his collage narratives with textbook-truisms, factoids, familiar characters, and historical events (some lifted entirely from other sources, some slightly altered, some purely fictional), Barthelme's ironic re-writing of this discourse reveals the arbitrary nature of these narrated items and the thin metaphorical framework that conceals the socio-cultural power mechanisms embedded in the nonfictional language of "factual" history.

Another anecdotal problematizing of these historical and biographical power mechanisms takes place in "At the Tolstoy Museum" (one of his earliest published pieces of illustrated collage fiction). Glowering through the back of the title page the hirsute monument of Tolstoy's portrait introduces the tale. And, as if to further accentuate the immense gravity of that portrait and the towering influence of the individual depicted therein, it is repeated on the following page with the diminutive silhouette of Napoleon Bonaparte added for scale (see figure 6).[127]

[127] Using the Napoleon figure as a unit of measure (1.7m), the approximate dimensions of the portrait can be estimated to about 8.15 x 4.7m; truly an enormous piece and, in all likelihood, a jealousy-inspiring affront to the portrait-loving Napoleon.

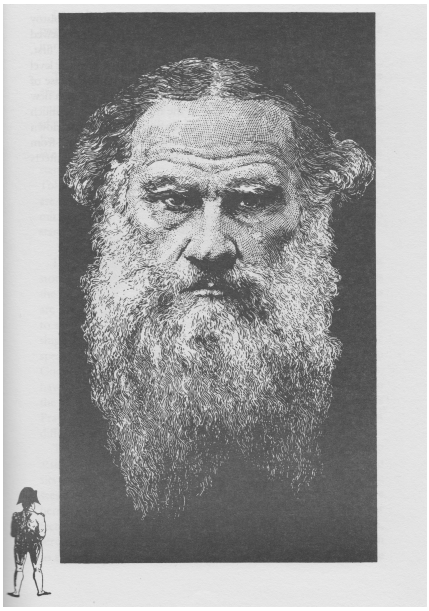

Figure 6. From "At the Tolstoy Museum," in *City Life,* 42.

Following this visual introduction, the disjointed prose accompaniment begins with a vague description, in the third-person 'we', of the museum and its collection of "some thirty thousand pictures of Count Leo Tolstoy" (*City Life* 43; hereafter *CL*). From the very outset the reader (even a reader familiar with Barthelme's work, indeed, even a reader familiar with both Barthelme and Tolstoy) is thrown off balance and asked, not so much to suspend their disbelief, but rather to actively participate in a suspensive game of belief deconstruction. Barthelme's story asks the reader to see the (ultimately) semantic game of credulity, authority, and authenticity for what it is, a game with invisible, arbitrary rules concerning objects that exist apart from the cognitive sphere. The story emphasizes this slippery semiotic relationship between cognition and context at the end of the story's first block of prose:

> *Tolstoy* means "fat" in Russian. His grandfather sent his linen to Holland to be washed. His mother *did not know* any bad words. As a

> youth he shaved off his eyebrows, hoping they would grow back bushier. He first contracted gonorrhea in 1847. He was once bitten on the face by a bear. He became a vegetarian in 1885. To make himself interesting, he occasionally bowed backwards. (*CL* 43, Barthelme's emphasis)

The immediate effect of such a passage is akin to convincingly supporting the case for the actual presence of something very odd (e.g., pink Chinese dolphins or a Czech presidential candidate with extensive facial tattoos; both of which do, incidentally, exist) and then winding up the argument with a statement so absurd that it renders the facts of the case immediately suspect (e.g., the Chinese dolphins and the tattooed Czech politician are said to be holding talks over the development of a new Sino-Czech space program, etc.). The result of this carefully structured, highly rhetorical deconstructive process — a process put to extensive use throughout Barthelme's fiction — is the creation of a pervasive doubt as to the veracity of the claims made by the text and the provenance of the images and/or facts scattered throughout the story.

"Exceptional as these facts are," writes Jerome Klinkowitz in *Donald Barthelme: An Exhibition*, "they can probably be found in any biography of Leo Tolstoy" (63). Klinkowitz continues:

> There, however, they would be couched within a narrative of so many conventional items that their special nature might not be appreciated—surely not in the way that they strike the reader here, cut off as they are, in Beckettian fashion, from any consequential, didactic, or even conceptual order. (63)

This sense that each of these individually narrated items has little more than a tangential relationship to the subject of Tolstoy not only describes the narrative itself, it also describes the erratic interaction of the text and the collage images dispersed strategically between these more or less free-floating sections of text.

Without the easy rhythmic balance of "Natural History," where each pairing of image and text is more or less self-contained and the comedic aspect of the story derives from the ironic juxtaposition of disparate objects combined with humourous, ekphrastic descriptions, in "At the Tolstoy Museum" the reader's interpretive balance is thrown off from the beginning by the variance of the story's components and its utter lack of cohesive ekphrasis. And instead of providing an artificial structuring of items and events (or an easily decodable comic simulacrum of epistemological rhetoric, such as in "Natural History") the imbalance created by the incongruity of the images and fragments of text becomes one source of the story's ironic tension.[128]

The fourth page of the story, for example, contains a full-page, late-eighteenth or early-nineteenth century etching of a young boy with a rapacious smirk clutching a glass of wine in one hand and a book in the other, the caption below reading: "*Tolstoy as a youth*" (44; see figure 7). Facing this on the next page is a first-person description of the "amazing cantilever" of the museum building and how its design "suggests that it is about to fall on you" (45). This architecture, the narrator states, is meant to reflect "Tolstoy's moral authority" (45). The next fragment of text contains a truncated description of the museum basement narrated in the free indirect voice. And in the final fragment of the page, the narration shifts to the third-person dramatic voice in order to describe the tremendous weeping induced by the portraits

[128] It should be noted that the pervasive "imbalance" in the *City Life* version of "At the Tolstoy Museum" is actually a very carefully structured incongruity that relies (significantly) upon the page arrangements of text and image. Much of this quirky cadence is lost in the versions published in *The New Yorker* and *Forty Stories*, which have drastically rearranged the components of the story to fit within a more condensed page layout. However, comparison of these three versions shows very clearly that the awkward architecture of this tale is not the result of randomness but is the outcome of a very deliberate process of arrangement. See Barthelme, "At the Tolstoy Museum" in *Forty Stories* 109-19; Barthelme, "At the Tolstoy Museum," *The New Yorker* (May 24, 1969): 29-35.

displayed in the museum. The overall experience of being continuously surrounded by the penetrating gaze of Tolstoy, ventures the last of these narrative voices, is not unlike "committing a small crime and being discovered at it by your father, who stands in four doorways, looking at you" (45). Indeed, Barthelme's arrangement achieves a similar effect by surrounding the reader, walling him/her into the pictographic maze, and expecting and denying interpretation all at once.

In the pages that follow, these abrupt changes of visual image and narrative direction continue from one free-floating metaphor to the next; each section of text and each image only capable of the slightest peripheral glance at one another. And like the rapid perspective shifts and narratorial heteroglossia that characterize Coover's "The Elevator," Barthelme's museum also seems to take shape in the (negative) space created between the various trajectories taken by each of the narrative items and the farcical gaps created in the temporality of the story's supposedly historiographical discourse.

Figure 7. From "At the Tolstoy Museum," in *City Life,* 44.

As Ulf Cronquist writes in his cognitive-semiotic textual analysis of "At the Tolstoy Museum," the story's "(mock) ekphrastic" structure combined with the constant circulation of the narration from view point to view point and voice to voice, "disrupts the temporal, linear processing of the text" (123). The result, argues Cronquist, is that:

> . . . since the illustrations are not directly connected to the running of the text, they too, of course, have an effect on the temporality. The spatial aspect of the story is instead emphasized, the fragmented positionality of the graphics read somewhat like literary *tableaux vivants*. . . . ("Donald Barthelme's Art of Storytelling" 123)[129]

And yet, as the narrative mutates from printed words into pictures and the museum comes alive, none of this life force ever seems to attach to Tolstoy directly or develop a discernable narrative course by which the reader might gain a greater

[129] This whirling blur of constant temporal and thematic shifts is put to similar use in another pseudo-historical narrative concerning a Russian museum: Alexander Sokurov's *Russian Ark* (2002), an uninterrupted, 96-minute tour through 300 years of Russian history.

insight into the world of Tolstoy's writing, his period in history, or his unique set of biographical circumstances.[130] Instead, the fractured ekphrastic process in this story says more about the infinite ways that Tolstoy, as an abstract metaphor for the artist, is subject to the volatile caprices of critical interpretation and cultural appropriation. And like the artist's work (the traces and artifacts attributed to a given individual), the always semiotically mediated biography of the artist, too, is shown to be a fragile construct reliant upon an equally fragile grid of temporal relations.

According to Michael Trussler's study, "Literary Artifacts: Ekphrasis in the Short Fiction of Donald Barthelme, Salman Rushdie, and John Edgar Wideman," breaking (or at least playfully reducing) the ties that bind both art and artist to these temporal relations expands the possibilities of the writing beyond the constraints of the fact/fantasy dichotomy.[131] In the works of Barthelme, Rushdie, and Wideman, Trussler explains, this dichotomy and the temporal frame that supports it are often subverted through an interweaving of representational systems (e.g., narrative prose, illustration, citation, etc.) and methods of narratorial delivery (e.g., homodiegetic narration, heterodiegetic narration, heteroglossia, etc.).[132] Trussler writes, "Wavering between representational systems becomes a strategic response to aesthetic, epistemological, or moral anxieties that threaten the work's formal or thematic

[130] As Maurice Couturier and Régis Durand note in their description of the story: "Barthelme's fictions are more like art galleries than lecture halls. It would be difficult, for instance, to read 'At the Tolstoy Museum' as a lecture on Tolstoy. . . . The rational interpretation of the text becomes as problematical as that of the pictures; it is bound to reflect the desires of the interpreter as much as the intentions of the artist." See Couturier and Durand, *Donald Barthelme*, 59.

[131] Of this process, Cronquist writes: "'At the Tolstoy Museum' begins with a *contract* between the agency of the narrator . . . and a possible recipient . . . in the aphonic mode of relating what it is like at this museum. The *crisis* appears as the texture of the words and images turns surreal. And an escalation into the *catastrophe* takes place as there is an obvious blur of fact and fiction, *transforming* the aphonic agency into an absurd act of delegating words and images, with the possible *discourse* perspective being an ironic comment on Horace's *ut pictura poesis*." See Cronquist, "Literary Artifacts," 128.

[132] See Cronquist, "Literary Artifacts," 123.

integrity in some way" (252). And one of the most effective means of defending this threatened integrity is by removing a leg, so to speak, from the "trialectic" tripod of ekphrasis, as Trussler explains:

> While all ekphrastic texts rely on an interdependent 'trialectic'—the art object is described by a narrator for the benefit of an audience—. . . [writers such as Barthelme, Rushdie, and Wideman complicate] this dynamic by localizing it within a limited temporal and dramatic frame. ("Literary Artifacts" 253)

By severely manipulating or limiting the temporal frame, distorting it, or placing it within a series of alternating dramatic frames (a method also applied extensively and to a similar verbal-visual collage effect in Gass's *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* [1968] and Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* [1972]), not only is the historicity of the object placed in a critical light, the object itself takes a new shape. Like the outrageously oversized portrait of Tolstoy introducing the tale, under these conditions of temporal warping and narratorial proliferation the uncertain object of Tolstoy is expanded to similar epic proportions. As this occurs the epistemological integrity of the object is also warped, breaking the false mirror of representation and displaying to the reader that, if *something* (e.g., Tolstoy) can be said to be *anything* (e.g., a tiger hunter; see figure 8), then *anything* can be said to be *anything*. Epistemological "truth," in this context, is highlighted as a construct without any privileged bearing on the creative act. The only thing guiding speech, writing, and the creative act in general are the choices made by the speaker, writer, and/or artist.

Figure 8. From "At the Tolstoy Museum," in *City Life,* 46.

Also highlighted through this fundamental paradox (a paradox obviously not lost on Barthelme; one also explored in similar fashion by Coover) is the fact that this type of mythical expansion is not purely the extraordinary construct of fiction, it also describes the ordinary cultural/historical/commercial process of mythicization as certain objects—including both the art object as well as the artist as an object—are fashioned and re-fashioned in ever greater proportions.[133] As Trussler comments at one point:

> [The] ekphrastic text doesn't encounter a pristine art object or visual image so much as it confronts an aesthetic phenomenon that has seemingly *already* undergone a translation into numerous discursive orders, among them art theory, capitalist marketing strategies, and the news media. ("Literary Artifacts" 253, Trussler's emphasis)

Barthelme's "At the Tolstoy Museum" confronts and makes sport of this process of infinite socio-cultural inflation by reassembling these anecdotal pieces of Tolstoy-*ness* into a monument to the writer that has (as with most monuments) very little to

[133] Morton Gurewitch writes, "There are obvious targets in 'At the Tolstoy Museum,' for example, mad hero-worship, perversely inept cultural custodianship, colossal symbolism, and a great artist's missionary urges metamorphosed into titanic self-aggrandisement." See Gurewitch, *The Ironic Temper and the Comic Imagination*, 44.

do with the actual experiences, works, and intentions of the object being celebrated. And by building up a mock replica of the ordinary absurdity of this process of "monumentalism," with all of its leaps and aporias proudly displayed, Barthelme's fiction exposes this process in all of its epistemological emptiness and artificiality.

Pasted together like the cardboard senator in "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning" (*Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts* [1968]; hereafter *UPUA*), Barthelme's Tolstoy seems little more than an amalgam of fragments and farcical aphorisms. And like the patchwork narrative wonderland of "Paraguay" (also collected in *CL*), the surreal landscape of Barthelme's imaginary museum is another hybrid panoply of façades and masks. As in these other stories, the central statement of Barthelme's "At the Tolstoy Museum" is that whatever resides beneath the surface of these masks and façades is less important than the surface itself, for beneath the thin, chaotic membrane of the collage is the glaring blast of the endless anything and the dizzying regress of the signifier signifying into the infinite.[134]

Obviously, any surface pretending to accurately represent every aspect of this endless anything would be false or, at best, incomplete. The collage surface, on the other hand, contains only hints to the subtle engineering of this endless anything without making any grandiose claims to infinite inclusivity. The collage puts its

[134] In *The Metafictional Muse*, Larry McCaffery writes: "Realistic characters and events, suggests Barthelme, are patently false because the elements out of which they are created—words, plot conventions, arbitrary connections—have proven unable to depict faithfully how human beings operate in the world. So, instead, Barthelme contents himself with creating literary fragments, anecdotes, and sketches which he skillfully builds out of the clichés and verbal drek of our contemporary idiom. Barthelme's emphasis on 'surface' and on process is further heightened by his manipulation of style and the technological aspects of print on the page which serve to keep the reader aware of the writing itself and to discourage the reader's search for 'depth.'" See McCaffery, "Donald Barthelme: The Aesthetics of Trash" in *The Metafictional Muse*, 115.

"mere appearance of mere appearance" on display (as Nietzsche might put it),[135] making no effort to conceal the gaps, leaps, and contradictions that arise during the re-combinatory process, but rather foregrounding them in such a way as to refashion them into an improvised illusion or meaningfully flawed facsimile of experience. The resulting abstraction, as Ronald Sukenick speculates in his essay, "The New Tradition in Fiction," is not only an amelioration of (incomplete, finite) experience, the deliberately flawed innovation developing out of this process is also a path to the discovery of new forms and relationships. Sukenick writes:

> As abstraction frees fiction from the representational and the need to imitate some version of reality other than its own, so improvisation liberates it from any *a priori* order and allows it to discover new sequences and interconnections in the flow of experience. In a situation where traditional patterns of order seem false or superfluous it may be better to open oneself as completely as possible to the immediacy of experience . . . . ("The New Tradition in Fiction" 44)

The collage, as an inherently metafictional narrative construct, exists as the artist's manifestation of this immediate re-ordering of experience. However, it must be emphasized that although the fractured structures and mixed messages of the collage tell a collection of stories, from a number of periods, and in a multitude of voices, each of the voices chosen to participate has been arranged to speak to the reader in a particular order. Also, it is worth noting that in Barthelme's anecdotal collections this order-subverting order is not merely a matter of random composition and/or chance selection (e.g., in the style of Burroughs's cut-ups). These collage narratives are the effect of a series of carefully nuanced, highly politicized, and transideologically

[135] In section four of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche argues: "[If] we conceive of our empirical existence, and of that of the world in general, as a continuously manifested representation of the primal unity, we shall then have to look on the dream as a *mere appearance of mere appearance* [Schein des Scheins], hence as a still higher appeasement of the primordial desire for mere appearance.'" See Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 45.

critical choices.

As described above, in "Natural History" and "At the Tolstoy Museum," Barthelme invents an entirely new arrangement of the semantic and semiotic structures used to define and control the epistemological concepts and constructs of institutionalized, authoritative discourse. And by breaking these structures apart and tinkering them down into their basic components, Barthelme's fiction momentarily dismantles and re-configures the rigid discourses of the "institution" and the mechanisms of cultural aggrandizement that attend it, building from this mangled pile of parts a new socio-cultural arrangement—one more in tune with the violence, mysticism, and high-flown rhetoric of late 60s and early 70s urban America.[136]

Ad Hoc Adventures

As in his anecdotal collections, Barthelme's ad hoc adventure narratives are equally subversive in their incongruous pairings of obscure objects and opaque textual fragments. In works such as "A Nation of Wheels" (1970)[137] and "The Story Thus Far:" (1971),[138] Barthelme challenges the archetypal quest pattern by apparently following no pattern at all (other than the pattern suggested by the collage elements themselves).[139] There is only the quest and the ironic twisting of its

[136] As Barthelme states in an interview with Michiko Kakutani: "In earlier times people could attempt to explain everything. Today there is too much to explain. The effort would be fruitless. So you have to try and do something else. For me it's more attempting to deal with parts instead of attempting to deal with the whole," Quoted in Tom LeClair, *The Art of Excess: Mastery in Contemporary American Fiction*, 25; see also Kakutani, "Donald Barthelme," 20.

[137] "A Nation of Wheels" was first published in *The New Yorker*, June 13, 1970 and later revised for inclusion in *Guilty Pleasures* (1974). All quotations and illustrations are taken from the reprint of the story as published in *The Teachings of Don B.* See Barthelme, *The Teachings of Don B.,* 127-33, 345.

[138] "The Story Thus Far:" was first published in *The New Yorker*, May 1, 1971. All quotations and illustrations are taken from the reprint of the story as published in *The Teachings of Don B.* See Barthelme, *The Teachings of Don B.,* 181-88, 347.

[139] In a 1975 interview with Charles Ruas and Judith Sherman for Pacifica Radio, Barthelme reveals that, in preparation for the construction of his National Book Award winning *The Slightly Irregular*

monomythical structures. And while a number of the works in this category do push the narrative to the edge of the reader's patience and come to seem a bit laborious in development and repetitive in their imagery (which is hardly a surprise, given that conventional characters and plots do not translate very well into the illustrated collage world), these narratives do, nevertheless, offer Barthelme another platform from which to launch his attack, as he puts it, against the overload of "cultural baggage."[140]

One such attack takes place within "A Nation of Wheels," an account of a world suddenly taken over by advancements in the technology of the tire. The narrative begins:

> Originally linked to the internal-combustion engine to provide cheap individual transportation, the wheel assumed near-autonomous status in the 1970s with the arrival of (1) self-powering devices and (2) the so-called "elastic consciousness." (*TTDB* 127)

In many ways a parodic send up of Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962),[141] Barthelme's account of this revolution in wheel consciousness (pun clearly intended) is also a satire of the period's over-saturation in academic and pseudo-academic terms such as "paradigm shift," "technological integration," and "co-optation," (all of which figure into the narrative in some revised form or context). Through snippets of complex, mystifying, and ultimately meaningless rhetoric, Barthelme's narrative ridicules this type of language through its re-

Fire Engine (1971), another ad hoc adventure narrative: "I gathered together the pictures I thought I could use. That book was dictated by the pictures. The text was written for the pictures." See Barthelme, *Not Knowing*, 245.

[140] In his 1975 interview with Ruas and Sherman, Barthelme states that his ironic approach to Western myth-making and the "cultural baggage" that attends this narrative process has to do with his being "pitted against historical actualities." See Barthelme, *Not Knowing*, 256.

[141] See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1962.

application to an absurd set of events.[142]

Paired with this linguistic complexity, the relatively simple collage images of the narrative add a touch of ironic suspense to this doomsday scenario of complete technological domination. And by giving this concept of dominance a metaphorical substance in the form of giant, looming, faceless tires, Barthelme's visual satire incites a number of simultaneous readings. On one level, the juxtaposition of these massive tires against the delicate, almost whimsical quality of the collaged etchings of nineteenth-century figures and scenery creates a strong visual contrast. And building on this contrast, the sheer size of these objects and the implication of their senseless capacity to crush humanity establish an unsettling surreality to the narrative (see figure 9).

Figure 9. From "A Nation of Wheels," in *The Teachings of Don B.*, 129.

At the same time, the faceless, empty signifier of the tire also acts as a surrogate

[142] 1960s comic-book aficionados would also notice that the "elastic consciousness" referred to in the above passage is not a citation from Thomas Kuhn, but rather an oblique reference to Stan Lee's Mister Fantastic, the rubberized leader of Marvel Comics' "Fantastic Four."

oppressor, an almost fill-in-the-blanks type of alien presence that might easily be replaced by any other technology from munitions to computers, fascist iconography to capitalist propaganda. And by showing revolution to be a mobile crisis, so to speak, Barthelme simultaneously engages with and ironically destabilizes the "real" threat of technological systems.

One of the more serious implications of this crisis of meaning and signification, as Barthelme hints in the final fragment of the piece, is the inherent plasticity of historical discourse. Looking to the past as a rationalization, further, as a justification for contemporary trends and events, Barthelme's story implies, is analogous to writing a narrative history of events in double reverse—the present already present in the past and the past always already present in the future (see figure 10). Thus, Barthelme's "Venus of Akron" is not only a *tiring out* of history (i.e., another paronomastic product of postmodern fatigue and a wink to Robert Rauschenberg's "Monogram" [1955-59]),[143] it is also the myth of history shown in its full, authentic inauthenticity, in its true irony as a series of arbitrary constructions and re-constructions—*merz* of the collage-like process of haphazard temporal progression.[144]

[143] In an introductory note to the catalogue of an exhibition of Rauschenberg's work at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston (1985), Barthelme writes: "If the basic principle of collage is the juxtaposition of unlike things within a visual field . . . he need in theory only find stranger and stranger things and build not-quite-decipherable rebuses from them. The theory is straightforward enough but, of course, inadequate. It ignores the true source of [the] artist's power, which lies in the mystery of particular choices. . . . Seizure, as it were, is always prior to understanding. It is an essential aspect of the tension . . . and it is where Rauschenberg's real genius lies – the tire wrestled over the goat's hind legs." See Barthelme, *Not Knowing*, 186.

[144] In a similar context, Alan Wilde writes that Barthelme perceives the world "as a kind of haphazard, endlessly organizable and reorganized playground." See Wilde, "Barthelme Unfair to Kierkegaard," 52.

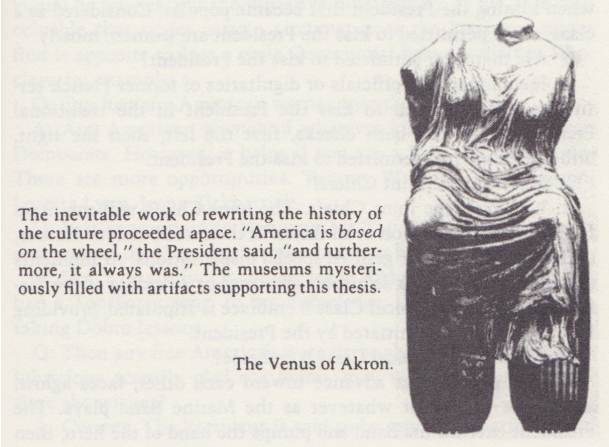

Figure 10. From "A Nation of Wheels," in *The Teachings of Don B*., 133.

Barthelme's approach in "The Story Thus Far:" contains a similarly absurd assault on technology, ideology, and the culture industry. This story concerns the other-worldly adventures of a certain Borys Althusser, "wealthy young manufacturer of sensitive electronic instruments" (*TTDB* 181), as he quests in search of a means of defeating the "Something" that seems to have spontaneously developed as a barrier between him and his wife, Evelyn.

The opening collage image of this story includes an illustration of a man (Borys) recoiling in horror at the presence of a giant marble torso topped with a head composed entirely of the twisted metal bands of some kind of electrical mechanism. Behind this bizarre, Greco-motorized entity a young woman (Evelyn, it would seem) stands immobile, clutching hand to chest (see figure 11). Like one of Francis Picabia's mechanical transformations accidentally wandering into pages of a Wilkie Collins novel, Barthelme's atrocity announces its arrival through an extreme slippage of period and context.

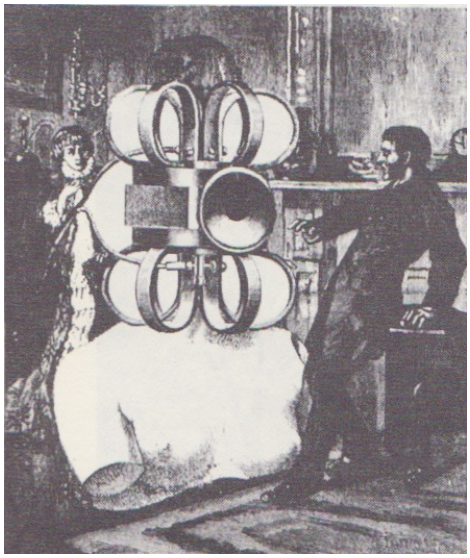

Figure 11. From "The Story Thus Far:" in *The Teachings of Don B*., 181.

Hidden in this pairing of image and text is also a rather complicated visual pun on Louis Althusser's thesis in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)" (1970).[145] In this work (revisiting the concept of reproduction as framed by Karl Marx in the second volume of *Capital*) Althusser writes, " . . . every social formation must reproduce the conditions of its production at the same time as it produces, and in order to be able to produce" (86). As graphically represented in Barthelme's collage image, Borys Althusser's monstrous "production" has come between him and his ostensible means of "reproduction" (i.e., disturbing the "social formation" of his relationship with his wife). No longer capable of (sexually) reproducing, Borys's production begets a new social formation: the requirement of the producer to rid himself of his own product so that he might resume reproduction.

[145] Originally published as in the French journal *La Pensée,* Vol. 151 (1970), Althusser's "Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d'État (Notes pour une recherche)" was later translated into English and collected in the volume, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. All quotations are taken from the reprint of this work as published in Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta eds., *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader* (Malden: Blackwell, 2006): 86-111.

The quest pattern that develops out of this ludicrous dilemma is equally convoluted. Told in the third-person historical present with occasional fragments of dialogue, the story follows the meandering protagonist as the narrator leads him from one admixture of pseudo-mythical debris to the next. Like the pairings in "Natural History," the pictorial content of each illustration is acknowledged and incorporated into the prose of the narrative, however, as in "A Nation of Wheels," the illustrations appear to dictate the course of the story's development without being (in and of themselves) solely responsible for the story's narrative arch. For although the illustrations are instrumental in the direction of the story's course, there is, again, the sense that the trilectic of ekphrasis has been critically altered. Indeed, as is often the case within Barthelme's ad hoc adventure narratives, the ekphrasis has been adjusted in such a way as to require the prose content of the piece to act as both a verbal connective tissue uniting each of the elements and also as a verbal stimulant capable of focusing the reader's attention toward the gaps in context that contain the coded ironies and cryptic paradoxes of the story's illustrated message. As with Duchamp's "L.H.O.O.Q." (1919), or René Magritte's "La trahison des images" (1928), much of the *frisson* generated in Barthelme's collage (to use a favorite term of his) relies upon these pictorially directed, verbally stimulated rifts in context.[146]

These illustrated collage narratives, as Maurice Couturier and Régis Durand describe in their brief study of Barthelme's works, are arranged "like art galleries" (59), what is more, "disreputable galleries," as Barbara Roe re-frames the same

[146] The importance of this verbal stimulant in the process of visual re-contextualization is a point often lost on the art historian, the museum curator, and the journalist when dealing with readymade items such as Duchamp's "Fountain" (1917). For by elevating the formal content of the readymade and/or the collage above its implied or verbally encoded context is to miss the point completely. The result, as is frequently the case with Duchamp's "Fountain," is praise for the gentle curves and pristine simplicity of an ordinary urinal without any recognition of the fact that such literal-mindedness is precisely the target of the large hole at the front of the urinal's basin.

metaphor (49); each textual element placed in just such a way as to guide the reader/viewer through a deceptively-ordered, disorderly experience.[147] And not unlike a hypothetical visitor's cognitively challenging experience at an achronological and/or ambiguously organized exhibition, in "The Story Thus Far:" there is a distinct sense that Borys's quest could, quite conceivably (i.e., given the requisite collage elements) continue indefinitely. Even the title of the story seems to deny finality and invite further additions to the narrative.

This ironically charged, episodic uncertainty is also reminiscent of the lengthy series of ritualistic trials and pseudo-mythical ploys that complicate the hero's ascent in "The Glass Mountain" (first published in *CL*) and which structure the wandering narrative trajectories in novels such as *Snow White*, *The Dead Father,* and *The King.* As in these narratives, each of the events confronted by Borys in "The Story Thus Far:" simply points to the next without leading to any deepening of the hero's characterization or any further definition of the situation (i.e., the "Something") that acts as his call to adventure. And, of course, along with Borys, the reader/viewer, too, is abruptly whisked along on Barthelme's high ironic tour of this questionably archetypal "zone unknown."

As Joseph Campbell defines it in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, the "zone unknown," is first and foremost a region outside of the quotidian confines of daylight reality.[148] Answering the call to adventure, the hero ventures forth from the familiar

[147] In his 1981 interview with J. D. O'Hara for *The Paris Review*, Barthelme remarks: "The order of pieces in a given [story] is mostly a matter of trying to make sure they don't get in each other's way. Much like hanging pictures for a show. Some pictures fight other pictures, not because either is a bad picture, but because the scale fights or the color fights." See Barthelme and O'Hara, "Donald Barthelme, The Art of Fiction No. 66," 196.

[148] In his introduction to *The Teachings of Don B.*, Thomas Pynchon writes: "[Barthelme] happens to be one of a handful of American authors […] who know instinctively how to stash the merchandise, bamboozle the inspectors, and smuggle their nocturnal contraband right on past the checkpoints of

and enters this obscure realm as the first step towards a alternate order of being. As Campbell writes:

> This first stage of the mythological journey—which we have designated the "call to adventure"—signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown. This fateful region of both treasure and danger may be variously represented: as a distant land, a forest, a kingdom underground, beneath the waves, or above the sky, a secret island, lofty mountaintop, or profound dream state; but it is always a place of strangely fluid and polymorphous beings, unimaginable torments, superhuman deeds, and impossible delight. (*The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 48)

And as if checking off each of the items on Campbell's list, Barthelme's "The Story Thus Far:" runs through a similar inventory of polymorphous beings and impossible encounters.

And while following Borys on this journey, the reader meets: a "lady of the evening" leaning against a termite-shaped hat stand who attempts to sell Borys an ornately decorated "pornographic television set" (182, see figure 12); a seeress standing "in a grove of pictorial elements" who summarily states that she doesn't deal with domestic problems (182); a "Masked Marvel," depicted as a bearded mask suspended above the mantlepiece of an elaborate, rococo fireplace (183); a pair of "Sick Friends," attended by a penitent saint, tickling each other in a brooding, Goya-*esque* landscape (183); a "dragonlet" named Wolfgang perched upon a burial urn (184); an "Emptiness," represented as a hollow suit of chainmail (184); and (among a host of other entities) a gathering of "Lone Rangers," in trademark disguise, celebrating "the closing of the West" (185, see figure 13).

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daylight 'reality.' What he called his 'secret vice' of 'cutting up and pasting together pictures' bears an analogy, at least, to what is supposed to go on in dreams, where images from the public domain are said likewise to combine in unique, private, with luck spiritually useful, ways. […] The effect each time […] is to put us in the presence of something already eerily familiar . . . to *remind* us that we have lived in these visionary cities and haunted forests, that the ancient faces we gaze into are faces we know . . . ." See Pynchon, *TTDB,* xvi-xvii.

Figure 12. From "The Story Thus Far:" in *The Teachings of Don B*., 182.

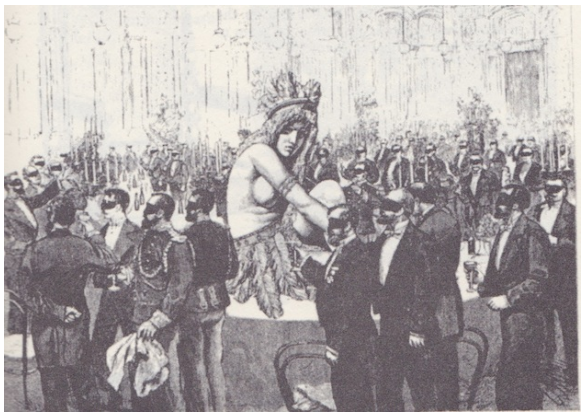

Figure 13. From "The Story Thus Far:" in *The Teachings of Don B*., 185.

Despite the range of his travels, Borys fails to obtain any useful information from these questionable oracles. But just as he is beginning to despair, Borys receives a timely tip from an "eternally damned child prodigy" residing in a nearby inferno (187). The child, sizzling in the fires of damnation for committing "all the sins available to seven-year-olds, and some that are not" (187), reminds him of his

significant expertise in the area of sensitive electronic devices. Following this reminder, Borys rushes back to his laboratory and "gears up his baddest sensitive electronic instrument" (188). Finally, after testing his machine on some lilies, which immediately droop, Borys states, "Well, […] if I can make lilies droop, I can . . ." (188), but the mythical threshold conflict that would ordinarily mark the hero's return from the unknown is conspicuously absent and is instead replaced with an ellipsis.

In the last verbal-visual pairing of the narrative, the reader finds the tale rushed to a hasty conclusion. Next to an image of two hands clasped in friendship superimposed over an image of cloaked figures dashing with torches through a dimly lit street, the text reads: "Throughout the Free Word, the hills resound to the sound of the news of Borys's improved position, vis-à-vis the threat. Now read on" (188). The adventure complete and the never altogether clear "Something" now (apparently) vanquished, the reader is faced with the choice of: a) reading a specific, limited meaning into the story's images through the objects represented in them (e.g., taking the drooping of the lily—classical symbol of pregnancy—along with the scientific instruments as code for an abortion, a reading that would create an interesting ironic loop when connected with the production/reproduction pun that opens the tale); b) allowing the symbolism of the objects—along with all of the potential meanings, implications, and associations that attend each of the various images—to add to the richness of the reading/viewing experience without limiting the interpretive possibilities of the work to a specific epistemological or hermeneutic arrangement; or, c) connecting the fractured pieces of mythicized material back to the various scientific, literary, philosophical, and art-historical discourses from which each of the

story's components originate and synthesizing a meaning from within the connections and juxtapositions created by this re-contextualization.

The question of interpretation here, as Robert A. Segal writes of myth scholarship in general, is one of origin, function, and subject matter (2).[149] However, Barthelme's ad hoc adventure narratives anticipate and subvert each of these angles of critical approach by turning all attempts to locate a precise (mythical) origin, (social/literary) function, and (narrative) subject into a compound containing inverse proportions of each: origin paired with non-origin, function paired with dysfunction, and subject matter hidden within the semiotic murk of a deliberately incoherent symbolism.

In Barthelme's collage narrative, mythic origin compounds with pseudo-mythic non-origin through the narrative's mixture of disparate materials and the temporal displacement that occurs as a result of the re-appropriation of these de-contextualized fragments. And yet, even were the reader to identify the original source and context of the pictorial elements, historical events, famous aphorisms, etc., this identification would not necessarily indicate a meaningful connection to a precedent discourse or context. In the place of a meaningful connection, Barthelme installs a generic, stencil-like pattern of "mythiness" sufficient to introduce an abstract structural similarity to certain monomythical and archetypal patterns, but with the original mythic content removed or displaced beyond recognition. Into this void Barthelme pours an altogether different set of contents, like bits of cultural

[149] Segal writes: "What unite the study of myth across the disciplines are the questions asked. The three main questions are those of origin, function, and subject matter. By 'origin' is meant why and how myth arises. By 'function' is meant why and how myth persists. The answer to the why of origin and function is usually a need, which myth arises to fulfill and lasts by continuing to fulfill. . . . By 'subject matter' is meant the referent of myth. Some theories read myth literally, so that the referent is the straightforward, apparent one, such as gods. Other theories read myth symbolically, and the symbolized referent can be anything." See Segal, *Myth,* 2.

flotsam immersed in the plastic resin of mythical discourse.

The interpretative impasse raised in pseudo-mythical narratives such as "The Story Thus Far:" also highlights one of the primary methodological paradoxes of myth interpretation, the paradox of imaginative projection. As Claude Lévi-Strauss writes in his introductory "overture" to *The Raw and the Cooked* (1964), no manner of deconstruction, morphological analysis, or semiotic dissection can ever pare a myth down to its last essential mytheme without the process being in some way directed by the imaginative postulations of the reader/critic (5). All attempts to locate the original "source" and/or social context of a given myth simply result in an endless jumble of more or less familiar parts that are constantly at risk of combining and re-combining in different, often contradictory ways during the deconstruction process. As Lévi-Strauss writes (quoted here at length):

> The study of myths raises a methodological problem, in that it cannot be carried out according to the Cartesian principle of breaking down the difficulty into as many parts as may be necessary for finding the solution. There is no real end to mythological analysis, no hidden unity to be grasped once the breaking-down process has been completed. Themes can be split up *ad infinitum*. Just when you think you have disentangled and separated them, you realize that they are knitting together again in response to the operation of unexpected affinities. Consequently the unity of the myth is never more than tendential and projective and cannot reflect a state or a particular moment of the myth. It is a phenomenon of the imagination, resulting from the attempt at interpretation; and its function is to endow the myth with synthetic form and to prevent its disintegration into a confusion of opposites. (*The Raw and the Cooked* 5)

Defining the study of myths as an "anaclastic" science (i.e., analogous to tracing the refracted, reflected, and broken rays of optical phenomena), Lévi-Strauss argues that, because the origin, function, and subject can only ever be projected, the interpreter of myth can only ever propose a hypothetical hermeneutic model built from the available verbal fragments, ritualistic behaviors, and social residues of myth (5-6).

Following these measured, charted, and artificially re-directed fragments towards a postulated origin, Lévi-Strauss maintains, reflects both the spontaneity and essential multiplicity of myth as well as its "in-terminable" persistence in human culture (6).

By emphasizing the anaclastic nature of myth construction and, thereby, ironizing the cultural forces that combine to perpetuate this "in-terminable" process, Barthelme's ad hoc adventure narratives engage in an ironic dialogue not only with myth but also with the mythicized history of Western culture as well. Viewed in this light, Barthelme's works of pseudo-myth might be seen as mocking, antagonistic commentaries on this socio-historical process of cultural (self-)mythicization.

Rather than pretending to hold up a mirror to reality (which is, even in the moment of experience, always a construction—psychological, cognitive, linguistic, visual, etc.—and therefore incomplete, delimited, and artificial), collage narratives such as "A Nation of Wheels" and "The Story Thus Far:" identify reality instead with the mechanism of the mirror itself—showing it to be little more than a fun-house matrix of stretched, multiplied and distorted images that reflect a culture's every move and gesture without ever capturing anything as it is (or was) actually experienced. Barthelme's ad hoc adventure narratives confront these deceptive, mytho-realistic mirrors and the warped histories contained in them by subverting the systems of archetype and authority that naturalize the myth-making process. And by presenting absurd "meldings" of myth and history that actively participate in the absurdity of experience, Barthelme's collage narratives simultaneously capture and critique the pervasive, postmodern anxieties that attend all of these cluttered mythical projections of reality.

Onto-Theatrical Productions

In the category of Barthelme's onto-theatrical productions, this ironic dialogue with the problem of *being with* history shifts toward a dialogue with the problem of *being in* that history (i.e., not *apart from* but rather *a part of* the narrative of history). In collage narratives such as "Brain Damage" (1970)[150] and "The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace" (c. 1972),[151] the arbitrary events, identities, and settings of an examined existence become the re-contextualized elements of the collage. However, this existential re-contextualization is, in the Barthelmean sense, both the conjunctive integration of disparate realities and the issue of that integration — not just the chance encounter famously described by Lautréamont, but the chosen offspring of all such encounters. These re-contextualized offspring become the monstrous beings that populate the stage and act as the props and scenery in Barthelme's onto-theatrical productions. As Barthelme states during an interview with Jerome Klinkowitz:

> The point of collage is that unlike things are stuck together to make, in the best case, a new reality. This new reality, in the best case, may be or imply a comment on the other reality from which it came, and may also be much else. It's an *itself*, if it's successful. ("Donald Barthelme" 51-52, Barthelme's emphasis)

Barthelme's onto-theatrical impulse is to place these re-combined, manipulated

[150] "Brain Damage" was first published in the February 21, 1970 issue of *The New Yorker* and subsequently included in *City Life* (1970). And according to Kim Herzinger's note in *TTDB* regarding the print history of "Brain Damage," the *City Life* reprint included substantial changes and is also notable for its incorporation of a previously published story: "Blue Flower Problem," previously published in *Harvest* 31.2, May 1967 (*TTDB* 345-46). Some sections of "Brain Damage" also appeared in another earlier story entitled, "Philadelphia," (uncollected), which was first published in the November 30, 1968 issue of *The New Yorker*. All quotations and images here have been taken from the reprint of "Brain Damage" in the British first edition of *City Life* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971). See Barthelme, *City Life*, 131-146.

[151] "The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace" first appeared in *The New Yorker*. This story, with slight alterations, was subsequently reprinted in *Sadness* (1972) and again, with further alterations, in *Forty Stories* (1987). All quotations and illustrations are taken from the version collected in the British first edition of *Sadness* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973).

and/or re-contextualized particles of "self-ness" into an order that satirically critiques the notion of a fixed, meaningful origin or singular reality. In so doing, Barthelme's manufactured realities (in the plural) expose the emptiness of being and the precarious nature of art as a remedy (a meaningful, existential filling, if you will) for such emptiness.[152]

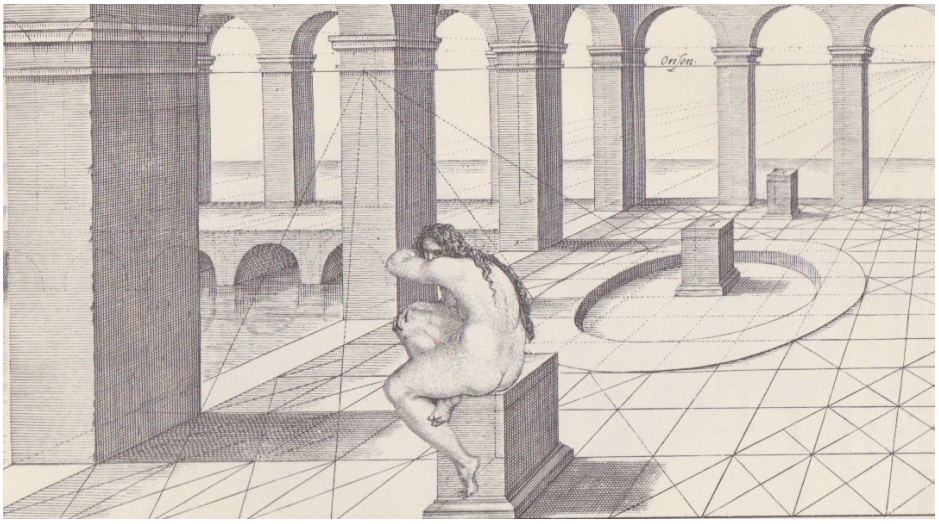

Figure 14. From "The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace," in *Sadness,* 131.

In "The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace," Barthelme takes the reader on a guided back-stage tour of one such attempt to fill this emptiness. Rising spontaneously from the crumbling desolation of an abandoned palazzo full of weeds and old blankets, Barthelme's narratorial "we" recounts the heady rise and inevitable decline of an extraordinary show. The reader meets the "Numbered Man" (130) and the "Sulking Lady" (131; see figure 14), "loud-roaring strong-stinking animals" and an auditioned explosion (132). And as the cast members pile up and compete for attention, a

[152] In the context of Barthelme's "Paraguay" (*City Life*), John Leland writes: "In the strange countries of the imagination, one finds only the machinery or ordering, while the Meaning which would 'fulfill' rather than merely 'fill' remains inaccessible." See Leland, "Remarks re-marked: Barthelme, What Curios of Signs!" 797.

distinctly allegorical self-reflexivity becomes increasingly apparent. For, from a certain perspective, as Alan Wilde observes in "Barthelme Unfair to Kierkegaard: Some Thoughts of Modern and Postmodern Irony," this collage narrative can be read as "a parable of the artist in an age of the conspicuous consumption of schlock" (61). Immediately becoming buried in these mountains of schlock, pastiche, and aesthetic trash, the activities of the artist (like the quotidian events and experiences of daily existence) are easily replaced, simulated, and/or misplaced. Indeed, art and artist both become little more than items in a list of equivalencies, as implied in the show's opening night lineup:

> A startlingly handsome man
> A Grand Cham
> A tulip craze
> The Prime Rate
> Edgar Allen Poe
> A colored light (*Sadness* 132)

The artist is thrown in with their art, the ordinary in with the extraordinary, and schlock is heaped upon schlock in a towering pile of ever increasing equivalence. In such an environment the question of a meaningful existence becomes less an issue of the Aristotelian "How do we live?" or the Cartesian "How do we know?" but rather, as the tale's narratorial voice frames it, "How can we improve the show?" (132)—*ego mutare, ergo sum*.[153]

Obviously, such a continual expectation of change, innovation, and "improvement" is not only exhausting for the artist, it creates an awkward tension between the artist and the audience (i.e., self and world), a tension which, by

[153] Larry McCaffery writes: "Compounding the difficulties of both the artist and the ordinary individual is the decay of the communication process itself at a time when modern man is becoming increasingly inundated with supposedly meaningful symbols. . . . The main problem facing us all, of course, is the trashy, brutalized condition of language itself which makes our communication process almost completely bog down. . . ." See McCaffery, *The Metafictional Muse,* 109.

implication, is also present in the art itself. "It is difficult to keep the public interested," sighs the narrator on the final page, "The supply of strange ideas is not endless. . . . Some things appear to be wonders in the beginning, but when you become familiar with them, are not wonderful at all" (139). The show's capacity to amaze now in decline, the audience losing interest, nevertheless, the narrator holds out one last, naive hope that conditions might improve with the addition of a volcano (see figure 15). And yet, as Wilde notes in his analysis, "The reader, observing it, violently smoking . . . is left to judge the likely efficacy of this and other wonders constructed or discovered for the salvation of art" ("Barthelme Unfair to Kierkegaard" 62).

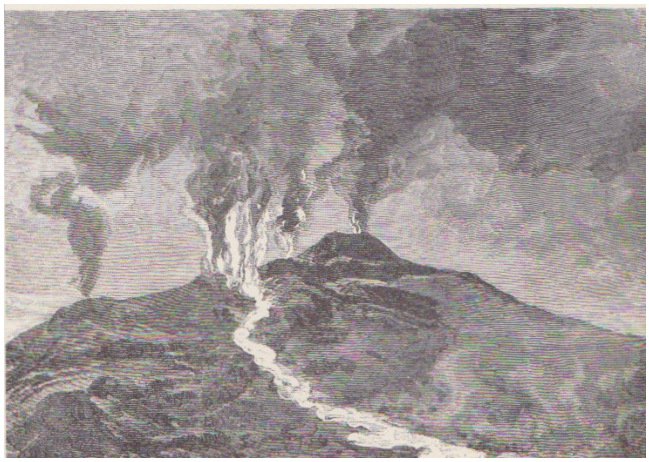

Figure 15. From "The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace," in *Sadness,* 139.

But even in the face of this bleak irony, the narrator's chipper tone of hope remains strangely intact. In fact, it is precisely this sense of hope that Barthelme locates in the very act of fiction writing, in the creation of art, and especially in the construction of collage. As he states in Lawrence Rust Hills's *Writer's Choice*,

"Mixing bits of this and that from various areas of life to make something that did not exist before is an oddly hopeful endeavor" (Qtd. in Barthelme *Not-Knowing* 56). Such an endeavor is hopeful, in part, because the artist hopes against all hope that the venture will actually come off, however, as Barthelme admits in "Not-Knowing" (paraphrasing a statement made by Harold Rosenberg), the composition of collage is also a distinctly "anxious" business; anxious in that every such construction engages in a limit-discourse, a balancing act between masterpiece and junk, between the creation of "a magical object" with the capacity to create meaning simply in its being perceived and "a dumb idea" that simply falls flat (*Not-Knowing* 19-20).[154]

Barthelme's onto-theatrical collage fictions deliberately straddle both ends of this spectrum. Through cut-and-paste tales of magical idiocy, these patchwork compendiums of human preposterousness certainly prolong, as Viktor Shklovsky might have phrased it, the sensational sensation of perception.[155] Or, as the anxiously hope-ridden narrator of Barthelme's "See the Moon?" puts it:

> I wanted to be a painter. . . . You don't know how I envy them. They can pick up a Baby Ruth wrapper on the street, glue it to the canvas (in the right place, of course, there's that), and lo! People crowd about and cry "A real Baby Ruth wrapper, by God, what could be realer than that!" Fantastic metaphysical advantage. You hate them, if you're ambitious. (*UPUA* 152)

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[154] Comparing the composition of Rauschenberg's "Monogram" to the creation of a literary text, Barthelme writes: "We can, however, wonder for a moment why the goat girdled with its tire is somehow a magical object, rather than, say, only a dumb idea. Harold Rosenberg speaks of the contemporary artwork as 'anxious,' as wondering: Am I a masterpiece or simply a pile of junk? […] What precisely is it in the coming together of goat and tire that is magical? […] What is magical about the object is that it at once invites and resists interpretation. Its artistic worth is measureable by the degree to which it remains, after interpretation, vital—no interpretation or cardiopulmonary push-pull can exhaust or empty it." See Barthelme, *Not Knowing,* 19-20.

[155] In his 1917 treatise, "Art as Technique," Shklovsky writes: "And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged." See Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," 19.

Perpetually caught in a self-cancelling fluctuation between passive ambition and vigorous apathy, the multi-voiced (and multi-*personalitied*) narrators in this category of Barthelme's fiction come across as somehow both more and less than the sum of their parts. Like the Baby Ruth wrapper, engineered to be both desirable and disposable, both infinitely meaningful (in the way Johns's Ballantine cans and Rauschenberg's cardboard boxes comment on themselves and generate endless interpretation) and infinitely meaningless (in the way a scrap of litter usually fails to attract even the slightest analytical attention), Barthelme's narrators hang on to contradiction for dear life. Indeed, in this category of his fiction, contradiction takes on a distinct similarity to vitality itself.

An appreciation of this oxymornonic resonance is central to an understanding of Barthelme's onto-theatrical collage fiction and the way that paradox is coaxed into place in these works. Indeed, if the "drama of cognition" (as described in the previous chapter) captures the décollage method of Coover's metafiction—a systematic denuding of myth and metaphor—the collage method of Barthelme's metafiction does the reverse. Where Coover's fiction cuts away to reveal the concealed, Barthelme's "drama of vacillation" focuses instead on the sinuous, existential threads that bind the irresolvable oppositions of experience together at the fracture points of language, philosophy, art, and ritual.

As explored in "Brain Damage" (collected in *CL*), this "drama of vacillation" takes the form of ten semi-autonomous prose fragments, entirely printed in italics, each describing an experience, dream, memory, or some supernatural mixture of the three. Each of these one-act fragments is separated from the others by a borrowed image or collage. These visual interludes are, in turn, intermittently attended by a set

of headlines printed in bold type. The images in this story and the figures that populate them do not, however, unite to perform an allegory of the artist (as in "The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace"). That level of diegesis is maintained chiefly by the prose. In "Brain Damage" the headlines and illustrations instead play the dual role of both extradiegetic narrator and metadiegetic audience. And like an eerie, disembodied anti-chorus, these narratorially active, narratologically critical text-images seem to chant their remarks in unison, each commenting on the relative significance of the events taking place in the narrative.

While it is always dangerous to place too much emphasis upon what appear to be identifiable literary influences when analyzing Barthelme's short stories (as in the works of Coover and Reed, Barthelme's parodic renderings and coded allusions are usually far too peripatetic for any one, particular correspondence to yield much beyond an instantial relevance), nevertheless, the wandering discourse in "Brain Damage" revisits in an interesting way Friedrich Nietzsche's exploration of the classical Greek chorus, the Apollonian-Dionysian dialectic, and tragic drama as posited in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). But rather than engaging in an outright ridicule of the questions raised or an overt parody of Nietzsche's unique style of argumentation, Barthelme's narrative seems to appeal to the "generative grammar" of Nietzsche's text (to apply a concept from Jerome Klinkowitz),[156] an engagement that deals with *The Birth of Tragedy* both on the level of its metaphor as well as through its discursive metaphysics. In what might be viewed as an illustrated

[156] In *Donald Barthelme: An Exhibition,* Jerome Klinkowitz writes: "[Barthelme's] method is not just one of parody or satire; those practices are helpful in finding a subject, but even to get the art process under way the author must look further to identify and understand the situation's generative grammar, and then use that grammar to produce something that both comments on the original situation and yields a work beyond it." See Klinkowitz, *Donald Barthelme*, 77.

dramatization of Nietzsche's discourse on the ontology of tragedy, Barthelme replies to the arguments in *The Birth of Tragedy* and re-applies them as the contextual basis for an ironic rendering of the philosophical and aesthetic issues involved in the question of art.

Barthelme's story begins with a first-person account of the narrator's discovery, in a garbage dump, of "*a book describing a rich new life of achievement, prosperity, and happiness*" (*CL* 133, Barthelme's emphasis throughout). This new life, the narrator reads, cannot be achieved individually; it must be achieved with the aid of "spirit teachers," supernatural helpers that communicate via ESP (133). Following the spirit teacher's advice, so the book claims, "*One could learn how to eliminate hostility from the hearts of others*" (133). As in "The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace," again Barthelme introduces the reader to a contradictory world of equivalencies: nature equated with artifice; rationalism equated with fideism; spirituality likened to the affects of consumerism within the naïve, uncritical mind. In fact, the only thing missing from this introductory passage is a mail-order address to which the reader might send away for his or her own set of "spirit teachers." Nevertheless, the book's location in a garbage dump makes the question of its value as a cultural artifact adequately clear (though it is a question that could never be adequately answered in either aesthetic or empirical terms). And riffing on Nietzsche's idealized projection of a world of balanced Apollonian-Dionysian energies, this passage also seems to echo Nietzsche's conceptual formula: "All that exists is just and unjust and equally justified in both," (72) to which Nietzsche adds, quoting from Goethe's *Faust*: "That is your world! A world indeed!—" (Qtd. in Nietzsche 72). And like Nietzsche's Apollo and Dionysus, who unite into the "saving

sorceress of *art*" and turn "the horror or absurdity of existence into notions with which one can live" (Nietzsche 60), Barthelme's "spirit teachers" seem to hover over the wasteland of a culture in decline, an entropic culture of the masses, by the masses, and for the masses, where everything is equivalent and the magic mountains of the terrain are manufactured out of trash—that is to say, *art*. For in such a world of equivalencies there can be no distinction.

In the next fragment of the narrative, this Apollonian-Dionysian dialectic is re-cast as an opposition between "the humanist position" and "the new electric awareness" concerning the question of whether or not to plug a bouquet of blue flowers into a wall socket (*CL* 134). The question at first seems a straightforward, purely mechanical one: either plug the flowers in, or do not. Where the issue gets sticky though is in the postulation of a philosophical rationale for either position. As the narrator explains, "The humanist position is not to plug in the flowers—to let them alone. Humanists believe in letting everything alone to be what it is, insofar as possible" (*CL* 134). The position of "new electric awareness," alternately, "requires that the flowers be plugged in, right away" (134). To which the narrator adds, "Toynbee's notions of challenge and response are also, perhaps, apposite" (134). The question, thus framed, presents itself as one of willful action or willful inaction; either the quasi-religious Dionysian intoxication of a "turned on" world, or the quasi-scientific Apollonian conservatism of individual sovereignty and self-preservation.

Unable, or unwilling (in the Nietzschean sense) to select between the relative merits of either position, the narrator hesitates:

> *My own idea about whether or not to plug in the flowers is somewhere between these ideas, in that gray area where nothing is done, really, but you vacillate for a while, thinking about it. The blue of the flowers is extremely handsome against the gray of that area*.

(*CL* 134, Barthelme's emphasis)

Like Nietzsche's tragic artist enamored of both Apollonian plasticity and Dionysian musicality, whose inspired self-abnegation reveals to him a "symbolical dream image" of the world (Nietzsche 38), the liminality of Barthelme's vacillating narrator effects a similar melding of symbol, dream, and image. And through the overlapping of metaphor and metaphysics that occurs in this liminal realm of active-inaction, of responsive non-response, the expressive range of the narration is liberated and expanded.

Structurally reminiscent of the shifting narratorial perspectives that characterize Coover's "The Elevator" and "The Babysitter," Barthelme's "Brain Damage" deals with its central onto-theatrical metaphor in a similarly existential fashion and with an equally dizzying array of narratorial voices. And as in Coover's works, the structure of this shifting narration keeps Barthelme's multiple narrators from becoming tied to any one point-of-view or cognitive framework. However, whereas Coover's multi-layer drama of cognition often comes across as a repetitious attempt to locate and define a metaphor more fully (as the dynamic sum of its parts), in Barthelme's fragmented drama of vacillation, any sense of metaphorical fullness or summation, once approached and questionably defined, is playfully denied.[157] Or, to draw another analogy from visual art, in contrast to Coover's cubist method of cognitive approximation, which charts its distance from reality in the measured geometry of point and counterpoint, the gray area of Barthelme's dadaist method of responsive non-response often acts as a kind of opaque, contemplative ground for the

[157] John Leland writes: "The effect of hesitation is built into Barthelme's art, less in the form of overt blasts against criticism and the critical tradition than in subtle disjunctions as the meanings promised by the signifier are offered and then denied." See Leland, "Remarks Re-marked," 799-800.

free mixing of readymade realities and the playful linguistic colors of cognitive abstraction.[158]

In spite of this playfulness, the captive audience in "Brain Damage," like the projected audience in "The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace," seems nonetheless bemused. Breaking in on the narrative with the exclamatory commotion of a classical Greek chorus, the first group of headlines read: "CROWD NOISES / MURMURING / MURMURING / YAWNING" (*CL* 135). This pattern is repeated again following the next fragment of prose: "RETCHING / FAINTING / DISMAL BEHAVIOR / TENDERING OF EXCUSES" (136), and again two pages later: "RHYTHMIC HANDCLAPPING / SLEEPING / WHAT RECOURSE?" (138). And at one point in the narrative these headlines even take up an entire page of the text:

WRITHING
HOWLING
MOANS
WHAT RECOURSE?
RHYTHMIC HANDCLAPPING
SHOUTING
SEXUAL ACTIVITY
CONSUMPTION OF FOOD
(*CL* 141, Barthelme's typography)

As if emerging from the haunted masks and anguished figures in the illustrations that attend them on the page (see figure 16), these headlines interrupt the flow of the narrative in a very interesting way. Rather than shocking the reader into a sudden awareness of the artificial nature of the story unfolding on the page (as often occurs

[158] It is precisely this opaque, abstract quality that Ronald Sukenick defines as "Bossa Nova": "This new thing is a style that we have come to call the Bossa Nova, an elaboration of the new tradition. Needless to say the Bossa Nova has no plot, no story, no character, no chronological sequence, no verisimilitude, no imitation, no allegory, no symbolism, no subject matter, no 'meaning.' It resists interpretation: as with Kafka's fiction, you can explain it and explain it, but it won't go away. The Bossa Nova is non-representational – it represents itself. Its main qualities are abstraction, improvisation, and opacity. The degree of abstraction may be great, as in Donald Barthelme, a writer who is very bossanova…." See Sukenick, "The New Tradition," 43-44.

when an intrusive narrator or the voice the "author" enters the narrative and highlights the contrast between text and external world), here the interaction of headline and image actually reinforces the inclusive quality of the narrative. And instead of dissolving the fourth wall and merely pretending to engage with the extratextual reader/audience, these verbally active graphic interludes seem to erect a fourth wall behind the reader, thereby immersing the reader more inclusively into the textual environment.

Similar to the surrogate audience that Nietzsche locates in A. W. Schlegel's concept of the chorus as the "ideal spectator" (Nietzsche 56-57), these images do not speak to the reader by emphasizing the performance *as performance*, or, in other words, by foregrounding the text as a simulacrum of events (as a work of metafiction this distinction is already adequately established and any such emphasis would simply create a greater sense of distance between the reader/audience and the implied stage of the text). Instead, these chorus-like interludes echo the abstract, contradictory tone of the narrative in the "ideal" voice of an abstract, contradictory audience. In this way the chorus simultaneously reifies and reinforces the abstraction, solidifying it into the substance of an immersive, metatextual performance. And standing in for the mixed reactions, emotional and physical responses, and critical variance of an actual audience, the repetition of these headlines not only enlivens the structure of the text and connects the fragments of prose into an awkwardly rhythmic progression, the placement of these headlines after each section of text also causes them to interfere with, indeed, to compete with the actual reactions and responses of the reader as the text is experienced.

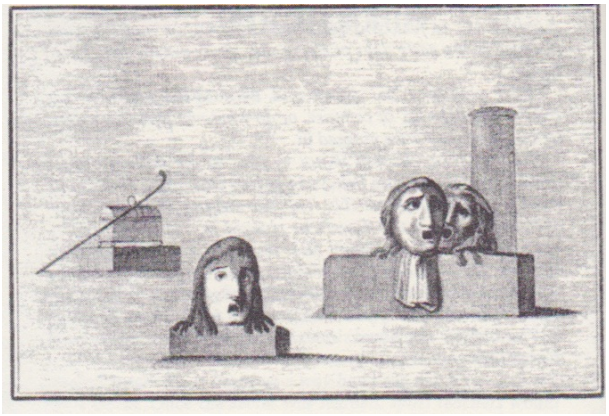

Figure 16. From "Brain Damage," in *City Life,* 135.

Not unlike Nietzsche's assessment of the chorus as described in the preface to Schiller's *Bride of Messina,* ". . . where [Schiller] regards the chorus as a living wall that tragedy constructs around itself . . . to preserve its ideal domain and its poetical freedom" (58), so too does this choral element in Barthelme's "Brain Damage" seal itself off, along with the reader, within the bounds of the narrative. Through this maneuver the absurd world of the text is not, however, extended outward or projected onto the extratextual world (i.e., text as object in the world), quite the reverse; by containing and actively including its own audience (and critic) within the diegetic sector of its own metatextual performance, the reader's world is, in a sense, preemptively implicated in the textual simulacrum of the performance (i.e., world as object in the text). As Mary Robertson remarks in "Postmodern Realism: Discourse as Antihero in Donald Barthelme's 'Brain Damage,'" this method is essentially set up to "enact the proposition that language speaks us rather than the other way around" (127).[159] Thus verbalized into existence, the simulated world created by the

[159] In her analysis of "Brain Damage," Mary Robertson describes this method at length, interpreting it as an indication of Barthelme's attempt to create a super-realistic narrative environment in which discourse itself might be treated as a character. See Robertson, "Postmodern Realism: Discourse as Antihero in Donald Barthelme's 'Brain Damage,'" 127.

text becomes a reality in its own right, semi-autonomous, ontologically self-referential, brought into being through its inclusion of the reader as a necessary character in the world of discourse, and yet, despite the apparently "secondary" nature of this world (as Michael Benton might term it),[160] "Brain Damage" should not be seen as a work of realism. Such an assessment would subtract from the playful, high ironic dynamics of the piece. Instead, what Barthelme creates in this and other tales within the onto-theatrical category of his fiction is not a credible representation, but an incredible surrogate, an ironic facsimile of reality that thrives on the friction created by contradiction. And in place of the ontological and epistemological objectivism of realistic narrative fiction, Barthelme's narrative offers an abstract metafictional substitute that acts as both an indefinite ontological proxy and a deliberately *mis*-representative replacement for the assumed epistemological stability of quotidian reality.

"TO WHAT END? / IN WHOSE NAME? / WHAT RECOURSE?" asks the final set of headlines (145). Where to look for answers when the answers are false? Who to look to for moral guidance when morals, along with the cultural myths and social mores that attend them, are revealed to be little more than arbitrary instructions plucked at random from the great fortune cookie of existence? And what to do in response to such a readymade world of artifice, contradiction and equivalency? It is here, in suggesting the ominous nature of these questions, that "Brain Damage" perverts (and/or exposes the latent perversion in) the youthful enthusiasm of the final section of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*.

Imagining an aestheticized world of Apollonian and Dionysian harmony, a

[160] See Benton, *Secondary Worlds: Literature Teaching and the Visual Arts*, 2-7.

sublime, tragic world of pleasurable pain and beautiful dissonance, in such a balanced world, Nietzsche proposes, the animated, heterogeneous individuality of man can only be preserved through a "transfiguring illusion." Nietzsche writes: "If we could imagine dissonance become man—and what else is man?—this dissonance, to be able to live, would need a splendid illusion that would cover dissonance with a veil of beauty" (Nietzsche 143). As if taking Nietzsche at his word, Barthelme translates this veil of illusion into a veil of "brain damage" (*CL* 146).

Falling from a "*great big blubbery cloud*" in a metaphysical flurry of unconsciousness (146), this all-pervading brain damage, like the sediments of time, history, language, and art that make up the dissonant residues of man (both Nietzsche's and Barthelme's), attaches to everything, blanketing existence itself in a shroud of equivalence:

> *Oh there's brain damage in the east, and brain damage in the west, and upstairs there's brain damage, and downstairs there's brain damage, and in my lady's parlor—brain damage. Brain damage is widespread.* […] *And you can hide under the bed but brain damage is under the bed, and you can hide in the universities but they are the very seat and soul of brain damage— Brain damage caused by bears who put your head in their foaming jaws while you are singing "Masters of War" . . . Brain damage caused by the sleeping revolution which no one can wake up . . . Brain damage caused by art. I could describe it better if I weren't afflicted with it . . .* (*CL* 146, Barthelme's emphasis)

This thought-muffling world where ignorance is bliss—further, where blissful ignorance is the "seat and soul" of the educational experience and where un-knowingness issues from the merest encounter with art—follows Nietzsche's concept to its inevitable conclusion by suggesting not only the level of human consciousness necessary for such an utopian veil of "splendid illusion," but also the

homogenizing consequence of any such process of universal artificialization.[161]

As Robert Scholes observes in "Metafiction," this final passage is also parodically reminiscent of the last section of Joyce's "The Dead" in *Dubliners*; and like the "quasi-religious" snow described at the end of Joyce's tale (Scholes "Metafiction" 109), Barthelme's brain damage, too, is at once *un*-differentiating and *de*-differentiating, silently covering the world in an opaque sheet of blankness. However, extending beyond the parodic dimension, Scholes argues, Barthelme's story is also "a measure of how far we have come since *Dubliners*" (109). As Scholes remarks:

> This snow-like fallout of brain damage is not just a reminder of the pollution of our physical atmosphere, it is the crust of phenomenal existence which has covered our mental landscape, cutting us off from the essence of our being, afflicting even the artists. For Barthelme man has become a phenomenon among phenomena. "WHAT RECOURSE?" ask the bold-type headlines of "Brain Damage" . . . . What recourse, indeed, for those gripped by phenomenological brain damage? They are beyond good and evil, beyond being, barely existing, snowed under. ("Metafiction" 109)

And yet, covered in the cultural fallout of discursive trash as he is, Barthelme's man—if we are to take the manifold voices of his collective narrators and the expanded power of action of this narration as any indication—is only at risk of succumbing to the thought-silencing effects of phenomenological brain damage when the play stops. As the narrator seems to imply in the final line of the story, "*Skiing along on the soft surface of brain damage, never to sink, because we don't know the danger—*" (*CL* 146); the danger is falling below the surface of the trash and

[161] Jean Baudrillard warns of this same process of aesthetic equivalency in *The Consumer Society* (1970). Locating the "Pop" sensibility that exploded in the 1960s as a paradigmatic threshold crossing of sorts, Baudrillard writes: "Whereas all art up to Pop was based on a vision of the world 'in depth,' Pop on the contrary claims to be homogeneous with their industrial and serial production and so with the artificial, fabricated character of the whole environment, homogeneous with this immanent order of signs: . . . homogeneous with the allover saturation and at the same time with the culturalised abstraction of this new order of things." See Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society,* 33.

becoming one with the trash, getting stuck in it, recognizing with it and merging with it by not remaining above it, on the surface.[162] The trick, Barthelme's fiction indicates time and again, is to stay up and maintain velocity without collapsing.

Trash, Meta-Trash, and the Aesthetics of Kitsch

While this velocity certainly requires the swiftness of ironic play and the agility of a ready wit, as the pataphysical analysis of "buffalo hump" production in *Snow White* suggests, an appreciative recognition of trash is another possible means of staying above the surface and remaining "on the leading edge of this trash phenomenon" (*Snow White* 104). As one of the novel's dwarf-narrators explains:

> Now you're probably familiar with the fact that the per-capita production of trash in this country is up from 2.75 pounds per day in 1920 to 4.5 pounds per day in 1965, the last year for which we have figures, and is increasing at the rate of about four percent a year. Now that rate will probably go up, because it's *been* going up, and I hazard that we may very well soon reach a point where it's 100 percent. Now at such a point, you will agree, the question turns from a question of disposing of this 'trash' to a question of appreciating its qualities, because, after all, it's 100 percent, right? And there can no longer be any question of 'disposing' of it, because it's all there is, and we will simply have to learn how to 'dig' it—that's slang, but peculiarly appropriate here. So that's why we're in the humps, right now, more really from a philosophical point of view than because we find them a great moneymaker. They are 'trash,' and what in fact could be more useless or trashlike? It's that we want to be on the leading edge of this trash phenomenon, the everted sphere of the future, and that's why we pay particular attention, too, to those aspects of language that may be seen as a model of the trash phenomenon. (*Snow White* 103-04)

When an exponentially increasing rate of production is matched by an exponentially increasing rate of consumption and man equals his own daily weight in excrement, trash appreciation becomes the only recourse; Duchamp's urinal; Rauschenberg's

[162] As Gass writes in his essay on Barthelme, suitably titled, "The Leading Edge of the Trash Phenomenon": "anything dropped in the dreck *is* dreck, at once, as an uneaten porkchop mislaid in the garbage," see William H. Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (Boston: Nonpareil, 1971): 101.

cardboard boxes; Cornell's archive of debris; all items selected from the heap and re-made through the process of re-contextualization into new, transcendental forms of trash, trash *about* trash: *meta*trash. These items of *meta*trash rise above the dump by commenting on the dump, transforming the *dump as world* metaphor into an uncomfortable, high ironic critique of postmodern reality. And in the same way that *meta*trash rises above its own object status by refusing to remain bound to the function for which it was originally produced, so too does Barthelme's collage metafiction operate (in hump factory fashion), re-producing itself from the found items of an artificial culture already buried in its own furnishings.

This playfully self-reflexive incorporation of the "trash phenomenon" is what prevents Barthelme's collage narrative from uncritically participating in the kind of nostalgic pastiche condemned by Fredric Jameson,[163] or naively adding to the eclectic postmodern kitsch described by Jean-François Lyotard.[164] As described previously, Barthelme's works are in no way an apology for the cultural decline they seem to document, nor do any of these works suffer from a romantic yearning for a yester-year that never was. Rather, running parallel to the biting, critical assessments of Jameson and Lyotard, Barthelme's fiction represents a similar attempt to chart the demise of Western culture, history, and art, and salvage a way forward from the wreckage.

Comparable to the late capitalist process of cultural equivalence explored in works such as "Flight of Pigeons from the Palace" and "Brain Damage," Lyotard's critique of postmodernity is also concerned with the vacuity of meaning and depth

[163] See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism,*16-19, 133-153.
[164] See Jean-François Lyotard, "Answer to the question: what is the Postmodern," in *The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982-1985*, 9-25.

that develops when cultures and cultural artifacts become commodified and global markets begin to direct the course of the culture industry. As Lyotard states in *The Postmodern Explained to Children*:

> Eclecticism is the zero-degree of contemporary general [postmodern] culture: you listen to reggae, you watch a western, you eat McDonald's at midday and local cuisine at night, you wear Paris perfume in Tokyo and dress retro in Hong Kong, knowledge is the stuff of TV game shows. (17)

It is easy to find a public for such a postmodern hodge-podge, Lyotard argues, because everything is on offer; every manner of expression is employed, every potential desire catered to and entertained. According to Lyotard, it is this predominating emphasis upon the artwork's potential to entertain (i.e., appeal to the consumer) that turns it from a cultural artifact reliant upon the political mechanisms of aesthetic evaluation into an object of kitsch reliant upon the market-driven mechanisms of commercial valuation (17).[165] Lyotard explains, "When art makes itself kitsch, it panders to the disorder which reigns in the 'taste' of the patron. Together, artist, gallery owner, critic and public indulge one another in the Anything Goes — it's time to relax" (17). In such an "Anything Goes" cultural economy, the artwork that sells, is published and distributed within the global network of cultural commerce, and becomes (through its ready availability to the public) the dominant mode of artistic creation, is the eclectic object, performance, or event that best announces its capacity to entertain and offers both producer and audience the best return on investment. Though disposable and sensitive to constant fluctuations in fashion (i.e., the reigning order of "taste"), these weaknesses are advertised as strengths, as signs of genuine authenticity, of constant freedom of choice and

[165] This section of Lyotard's description of "postmodern kitsch" is also discussed in similar terms by Simon Malpas. See Malpas, *The Postmodern*, 1-3.

immediate currency. And in offering an interminable variety of temporary distractions (note the trademark postmodern paradox in such an oxymoronic construct), Lyotard argues, these items of postmodern kitsch dispel doubt and anxiety (17). Their endless variety soothes, relaxes, and benumbs the mind as effortlessly as TV.

This "Anything Goes" aspect of postmodern kitsch, as well as its questionable function as a socio-cultural analgesic, plays a prominent role in Barthelme's unique brand of parody. Indeed, if the anxiety-generating, deeply self-doubting aspects of his writing were not adequately clear, the label of "eclectic postmodern kitsch" might easily apply. He adopts may of the eclectic traits described by Lyotard and includes a steady stream of kitsch-like tropes, situations, and cultural icons into his writing. However, what Lyotard's approach fails to adequately address, and what saves the high ironic works of writers such as Barthelme, Coover, and Reed from unconsciously falling into this category, is the way in which these writers consciously turn the kitsch-making process against itself.

By pretending to be a harmless manifestation of individual "taste," kitsch refuses to respond to itself with any sense of doubt; it states only, *I am—flaws and all—what I am*, and equates all criticism as describing little more than an insensitivity to its purely individual value (i.e., marking a difference in taste). However, as with the common proverb, the empty cliché, the popular metaphor, and other objects of pervasive cultural influence (e.g., the Mona Lisa, Lev Tolstoy, Snow White, etc.), the falsely unassailable certainty of kitsch makes it a prime target for the self-reflexive, skeptical tension of irony. It is the introduction of this ironic tension that turns the kitsch object of highly individualized certainty into an object of

comic ridicule (e.g., through the frivolous gaps in "seriousness" created by the pun, double-entendre, Freudian slip, exaggeration, awkward transition, or other verbal winks that hint to the reader, "*The author knows that Tolstoy was a womanizer*," even as the author extols the virtues of the Tolstoyan vow to celibacy).[166] And it is precisely this ironic tension that Barthelme introduces into his tongue-in-cheek manipulations of kitsch in his short prose, novels, and especially in his collage narratives. By accentuating the kitsch quality of the source material and turning the certainty of its pervasive cultural influence against itself through hyperbole, absurd semantic dislocations, outlandish vocabulary, and imagined events involving these objects, Barthelme's ironic applications of kitsch and other trash phenomena critique the kitsch-making process and actively participate in a (self-)mocking appraisal of the culture of nostalgia and novelty that continues to blindly reproduce and consume these objects of kitsch.

Collage Narrative in *Snow White*

Nowhere is this (self-)ironizing process more evident than in the selection of collage narrative short stories described above and in collage novels such as Barthelme's *Snow White*.[167] As stated earlier in the chapter, the three general categories of Barthelme's collage narrative "method"—his anecdotal collections, ad hoc adventures, and onto-theatrical performances—each find their genesis in this

[166] Susan Sontag argues a similar point in her descriptions of the ironic tension inherent in the camp sensibility. For example, in item 41: "The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relation to 'the serious.' One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious." See Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 288.

[167] Other collage novels such as Barthelme's *The Dead Father* (1975), as well as his collaboration with graphic designer, Seymour Chwast, in *Sam's Bar: An American Landscape* (1987), would also fit into this self-ironizing context.

novel. Together these fragmented, yet awkwardly interwoven patterns emerge to form the "metafictional fabric" of the *Snow White* textual collage.[168] The resulting text, as Larry McCaffery notes in *The Metafictional Muse*, "is not so much a novel as a sustained collection of fragments, organized loosely around the Snow White fairy tale" (138). Nevertheless, it would be a mistake (a mistake the novel constantly asks the reader to make) to read Barthelme's *Snow White* as holding the fairy tale tradition as some kind of pure "mythic center,"[169] or as a sacred essence akin to "Frost's Secret," as Barthelme describes in "Not-Knowing," which simply "sits in the center of a ring and Knows" (*Not-Knowing* 15).[170] Barthelme's novel does not imply that there is any kind of essential purity residing within the great globe of discourse around which the fragments of his collage seem to rotate and collide (falling in and out of orbit like deranged semiotic satellites). On the contrary, it is the sublime impurity of the Snow White object, as both an item of kitsch and a world unto itself, which concerns the greater part of the novel. And, as if sifting through the vast layers of trash that have accumulated around Snow White (as an object, subject, metaphor, personality, concept, ritual, symbol, fetish, marketing tool, *ad infinitum*), Barthelme's *Snow White* re-constructs from this enormous amalgam of significations a ludicrous collection of anecdotes, a series of ad hoc adventures, and a sustained onto-theatrical performance that brutally interrogates (ultimately seeking to destroy, it would seem) the distinction between art as being *about the world* and art as being *in the world*.

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[168] See McCaffery, *The Metafictional Muse*, 137.

[169] McCaffery echoes this in saying: "Since for Barthelme the changes in modern society make holding of any mythic center impossible, we find that the mythic parallels [in *Snow White*] follow the story only up to certain points and then find appropriate alterations." See McCaffery, *The Metafictional Muse*, 141.

[170] Robert Frost's two-line poem, "The Secret Sits," runs: "We dance round in a ring and suppose, / But the Secret sits in the middle and knows." see Frost, *A Witness Tree: New Poems*, 15.

Fundamental to the breaking down of this distinction is an awareness of the text as object. As Barthelme writes in his essay, "After Joyce" (1964), a rather "mysterious shift . . . takes place as soon as one says that art is not about something but *is* something" (*Not-Knowing* 3, Barthelme's emphasis). Barthelme explains that the result of this shift from the descriptive nature of *about*-ness to the existential nature of *is*-ness is that:

> . . . the literary work becomes an object in the world rather than a text or commentary upon the world—a crucial change in status which was also taking place in painting. With Joyce, and to a lesser degree Gertrude Stein, fiction altered its placement in the world in a movement so radical that its consequences have yet to be assimilated. (*Not-Knowing* 3-4)

No longer satisfied with the distance between literature and world, Barthelme states, Joyce and Stein create the "literary object—which is then encountered in the same way as other objects in the world" (4). Barthelme continues:

> The question becomes: what is the nature of the new [literary] object? Here one can see the immediate result of the shift. Interrogating older works, the question is: what do they say about the world and being in the world? But the literary object is itself "world" and the theoretical advantage is that in asking it questions you are asking questions of the world directly. This sounds like a species of ventriloquism—the writer throwing his voice. But it is, rather, a stunning strategic gain for the writer. He has in fact removed himself from the work, just as Joyce instructed him to do. The reader is not listening to an authoritative account of the world delivered by an expert . . . but bumping into something that is *there*, like a rock or a refrigerator. (*Not-Knowing* 4, Barthelme's emphasis)

However, Barthelme takes care to note, the literary object "does not declare itself all at once, in a rush of pleasant naïveté" (4), instead, it requires the reader to ask, "What is it?" rather than, "What is it about?" In this way, Barthelme maintains, "The reader reconstitutes the work by his active participation, by approaching the object, tapping it, shaking it, holding it to his ear to hear the roaring within" (4). The literary object,

in other words, is always a work-in-progress, problematic, infinitely incomplete, indeed, only ever tentatively completed within the imagination of the reader.

In just such a manner does Barthelme's *Snow White* simultaneously construct and deconstruct itself. By packing into its pages everything that has to do with Snow White (interspersed with just as much that doesn't) Barthelme charges the reader with the task of connecting the dots to complete the suggested picture. In fact, Barthelme literalizes this same metaphor on the very first page of the novel:

> SHE is a tall dark beauty containing a great many beauty spots: one above the breast, one above the belly, one above the knee, one above the ankle, one above the buttock, one on the back of the neck. All of these are on the left side, more or less in a row, as you go up and down:
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> The hair is black as ebony, the skin white as snow. (*Snow White* 9)

Racing, zig-zag, over the surface of Snow White's body before aligning into an overtly artificial linearity, this arrangement immediately scrambles the reader's expectations while also calling to mind, in the last line, precedent versions of the tale. From the outset the tone is both set and unsettled, vacillating between an appeal to the known and an anxious entry into realm of abstraction.

Although much has been made of Barthelme's inversions and perversions in *Snow White* of the Grimm brothers' "Schneewittchen" (collected in *Kinder- und Hausmärchen,* 1812; 1857) and Walt Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*

(1937), the relationship is not a matter of direct adaptation or straight parody. As McCaffery notes:

> If we examine the structure of *Snow White* more closely, we find that like Coover, but unlike Joyce in *Ulysses*, Barthelme prevents his perspective from being seriously mythic to any extent. The big problem for Barthelme—as for any writer today who wishes to rely on myth in one way or another—is a self-consciousness about myth that has reached such paralyzing proportions that most myth is now employed only for comic purposes. (*The Metafictional Muse* 138-39)

An important part of the question here, as McCaffery suggests in the passage above, is one of reliance. But what is the extent to which a work can be said to actually "rely" upon some other work? How reliable is this reliance? And, as discussed previously, in what sense is any sort of structural correspondence a valid method of determining or interpreting this contingency?

In *Snow White* the nature and extent of this reliance is certainly investigated and even, in the fashion of the beauty spots that introduce the novel, becomes another literalized metaphor—the novel itself actively "testing" the reader through the inclusion of an actual multiple-choice questionnaire at the close of part one:

> QUESTIONS:
> 1. Do you like the story so far? Yes ( ) No ( )
> 2. Does Snow White resemble the Snow White you remember? Yes ( ) No ( )
> 3. Have you understood, in reading to this point, that Paul is the prince-figure? Yes ( ) No ( )
> 4. That Jane is the wicked stepmother-figure? Yes ( ) No ( )
> 5. In the further development of the story, would you like more emotion ( ) or less emotion ( )?
> 6. Is there too much *blague* in the narration? ( )
> Not enough *blague*? ( )
> (*Snow White* 88, Barthelme's emphasis and typography)

As implied in *Snow White*'s mid-novel exam (indeed, as leadingly spelled out), correspondence is inevitable. Nevertheless, although previous tellings of the Snow White tale provide the source material and genealogical background to which

Barthelme's metafictional re-working of the tale corresponds (in the sense defined in the second chapter of this dissertation), the structural arrangement of Barthelme's *Snow White* actually bears about as much textual resemblance to these precedent versions of the tale as Jasper Johns's "White Flag" (1955) bears to the American standard (apocryphally) attributed to Betsy Ross (1777). And like the implicit antagonism of Johns's collage to the "stars and stripes" fantasy of unity and independence embodied in the American flag (as a political icon and object of cultural kitsch), the structure of Barthelme's narrative proceeds in a similar inverse relation to its own iconic fairy tale source material. In fact, a close morphological comparison of Barthelme's version to precedent versions of the tale would find very little in the way of direct, textual citation or stylistic similarity. Instead, Barthelme's *Snow White* parodies its source material, as John Leland writes, by becoming "a form of a form, absorbing the aspirations of the original structure yet surviving only as it endlessly repeats itself without resolution" (804). In this way Barthelme radically reshapes the content and context of the Snow White narrative into an actively participative critique of its own parodic discourse.

According to Nicholas Sloboda's study of heteroglossia and collage in *Snow White*, this reactionary critique "delays and modifies the traditional plot and, at the same time, draws attention to the (un)making of the story itself" (114).[171] Indeed, Barthelme's tale seems closest to the "Schneewittchen" of the Grimms when it recalls the symbolic objects that appear in the nineteenth-century German version

[171] In *Fantasy and Mimesis*, Kathryn Hume states a similar point: "Barthelme erases most of the usual linking elements in *Snow White*, and those remaining are mostly ironic. A gruesomely distorted version of the fairy tale mocks us with its insufficiencies as a giver of meaning." See Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis: Reponses to Reality in Western Literature,* 93.

and presents them as possible notes towards a Freudian analysis of tale (centered and printed in bold type):

> THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SNOW WHITE:
> IN THE AREA OF FEARS, SHE FEARS
> MIRRORS
> APPLES
> POISONED COMBS (*Snow White* 23)

This pattern, as in "Brain Damage," is repeated at intervals throughout the text: "WHAT SNOW WHITE REMEMBERS: / THE HUNTSMAN / THE FOREST / THE STEAMING KNIFE" (*Snow White* 45). And to a similar extent, the animated Disney version is most clearly evoked in the episodes of Barthelme's telling that are the anti-Disney in structure—such as in the mundane renaming of the dwarfs (Bill, Kevin, Edward, Hubert, Henry, Clem, and Dan [10]), in the dwarfs' re-assignation to a new set of personality types (Bill is anxious and dislikes physical contact [10-1], Dan is skeptical [10], Kevin is easily discouraged [12], Henry is hypercritical [26-27], etc.), as well as in the various accounts of the dwarfs' sexual relations with Snow White in the shower (10-11, 28-29, 40).

These constant reversals and inversions are important to the structure of *Snow White* not so much in their disruption of coherent structure, but rather in their appeal to the questionable coherence of the structures that already exist in the mind of the reader. In line with Johns's famous comment regarding the structure of the flag as "[something] the mind already knows"[172] (a phrase frequently quoted by Barthelme),

[172] In an interview for *Time* magazine, Johns remarks: "It all began with my painting a picture of an American flag. Using this design took care of a great deal for me because I didn't have to design it. So I went on to similar things like the targets things the mind already knows. That gave me room to work on other levels. For instance, I've always thought of a painting as a surface; painting it in one color made this very clear. . . . A picture ought to be looked at the same way you look at a radiator." See *"His heart belongs to DADA*," *Time* 73 (4 May, 1959): 58; quoted in Varnedoe, ed., *Jasper Johns, Writings, Sketchbook Notes, Interviews*, 82.

Snow White actively recruits the memory of the reader both in the construction of meaning and relevance, as well as in the completion of the parodic loop implied by each of the disconnected, seemingly random, and/or open-ended fragments.[173] And by augmenting the already known, or stating the opposite, the already known is constantly appealed to as an abstract narrative background against which the reader must, in a very real sense, piece together his or her own personally constructed, parodic "Snow White" collage narrative. As Richard Gilman writes in *The Confusion of Realms*:

> [The Snow White tale] is here refracted through the prism of a contemporary sensibility so that it emerges broken up into fragments, shards of its original identity, of its historical career in our consciousness . . . and of its recorded or potential uses for sociology and psychology. (45)

Paradoxically, in providing the reader with all of its "potential uses" and every conceivable means of interpreting it, *Snow White* actively resists the same interpretive approaches it suggests. Taking the novel's various incorporations and replies to psychology, for example, with its frequent quotations (35, 82), scraps of pseudo-analysis (10, 23, 45, 76, 105-107), and allusions to Freud (81, 145, 160), the reader is left with little more than a collection of self-ironizing anecdotes that actually do more to discredit than to forward psychological analysis (intratextually and extratextually) as a fruitful method of interpretation. Following such an

[173] R. E. Johnson, Jr. writes: ". . . for Barthelme, to deconstruct the origin is not the same as to eliminate it. His is neither an ontology of presence nor one of absence, but of both presence and absence. It is neither as closed as the 'old' 'writerly' fiction is supposed to be nor as open as the do-it-yourself games celebrated in certain of the essays collected in Federman's *Surfiction*. Both open and closed, it is one of those fictions Frank Kermode describes as both a projection and a 'disconfirmation' of the possibility and the impossibility of closure. Similar to that characteristic which Kermode, in another essay, finds in *The Crying of Lot 49*, Barthelme's fiction 'indicates the enormous absurdity of both assumptions: that there is a structure, and that there is not.'" See Johnson, Jr., "'Bees Barking in the Night': The End and Beginning of Donald Barthelme's Narrative," 75-76.

approach, the reader is left with little more than a list of page numbers not unlike the one above.

Equally pointless as an approach to the novel, is any attempt to actually connect the metaphorical dots and recreate a narrative arch for the novel based on the few points where Barthelme's *Snow White* overlaps or seems to directly respond to precedent versions of the tale (e.g., the story as told by the Grimm brothers, or Disney, etc.). Such a reduction of the novel's myriad ad hoc adventures, narrative currents, sub-plots, and thematic threads can only effect a series of arbitrary leaps from point to point, from isolated symbol to isolated symbol, and result in either: a) a summary of alterations to the always already problematic concept of Snow White's "original identity" (i.e., yet another anecdotal collection, such as the list of psychology references described previously or an itemized inventory of correspondences similar to those listed in the novel's "questionnaire"); or, b) a thin facsimile of the story as it is already known, which ignores Barthelme's novel entirely.

A third route into the novel (which, incidentally, starts to make the tripartite structure of this analysis itself begin to approach the structure of a fairy tale) is one that takes into account the onto-theatrical nature of Barthelme's production of Snow White as an "itself" (in the sense forwarded in "After Joyce"), or in other words, as a literary object existing in the world of discourse created by its interaction with the reader.

Looking at *Snow White* in this way it becomes apparent that the text's resistance to all attempts at a clear course of interpretation *is* its performance. Like the repetitive string of "reactions" to Snow White's hair that concerns the greater

part of the novel's second section (musings and pet theories that never succeed in truly defining it or usefully comprehending it [95, 96, 98, 100, 102, 105, 108, 117]), the novel continually faces the reader with the same question: *What is it?* As Bill, the de facto leader of the dwarfs, deliberates:

> Whereas once we were simple bourgeois who knew what to do, now we are complex bourgeois who are at a loss. We do not like this complexity. We circle it wearily, prodding it from time to time with a shopkeeper's forefinger: What is it? Is it, perhaps, *bad for business*? Equanimity has leaked away. There was a moment, however, when equanimity was not the chief consideration. That moment in which we looked at Snow White and understood for the first time that we were fond of her. That was a moment. (*Snow White* 94)

While the nature of parody makes the question of what *Snow White* is "about" considerably less pressing—any work of parody will always be, implicitly, "about" the circumstances in which it was written—still the question remains open as to what exactly it is that makes Barthelme's *Snow White* an existence in the world, or rather, an "itself." The answer to this question, indeed, the answer to the existential question posed by most of Barthelme's collage fictions, has an incredibly simple answer—an answer nonetheless profound for its simplicity. The answer is precisely the question it asks of the reader: *What is it?* In that act the text becomes an object in the world, like a rock or refrigerator—the word suddenly made thing by virtue of the profound doubt it creates in being confronted.

And like Picasso in his studio, circa 1912, no longer content with painting likenesses of this and that—mere representations of guitars—bending some paper and adding some frets, an actual instrument suddenly leaps into the world. Not merely a representation of the guitar, or the concept of "guitar-ness", but a real guitar that plays music by simply being perceived. In just such a fashion does Barthelme

bend words into shapes, temporal verbalizations into spatial experience, and the mere paper of a text into the landscape of an entirely new world.

CHAPTER FIVE

ISHMAEL REED: (AFRO-)AMERICAN HISTORY BROKE-DOWN

i am outside of
history. i wish
i had some peanuts, it
looks hungry there in
its cage

i am inside of
history. its
hungrier than i
thot

--- Ishmael Reed, "Dualism: in ralph ellison's invisible man"
Conjure: Selected Poems, 1963-1970

Ironic Play in the Signifyin(g) Tradition

Before this chapter moves into an exploration of Ishmael Reed's *The Free-lance Pallbearers* (1967), *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969), and *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), and an analysis of how these novels figure within the metafictional spectrum of the high ironic mode, it might be useful to begin by considering the parodic mechanism of the poem above. Featuring prominently in such seminal works of African-American literary theory as Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s *Figures in Black* (1987) and *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), introducing Reginald Martin's influential study of the author in *Ishmael Reed and the New Black Aesthetic Critics* (1988), and playing an important role in the "Postcolonial Stylistics and Postmodern Logic" section of Paul Hamilton's *Historicism* (1996),[174] Reed's poem, "Dualism: in ralph ellison's invisible man" (collected in *Conjure: Selected Poems, 1963-1970* [1971]),

[174] See Gates, *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self*, 275-76; Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, 237-38; Martin, *Ishmael Reed and the New Black Aesthetic Critics*, 1; and Hamilton, *Historicism*, 190-91.

not only displays a number of the central elements in Reed's humourously polemical perspective, analysis of this poem also provides a critical point of entry into Reed's deceptively complex, multi-layered method of parodic encoding and citation, or, what Gates (among others) refers to as, "signifying."

In keeping with Reed's "signifying," one response to this poem might be to ask: does the poem's disembodied voice carry in its cartoon pocket, as it were, the 1,369 matches necessary to resolve this predicament, or, is this the point at which the music surges into its finale and a fanciful "*That's all (black) folks!*" zooms into view? As does the narrator in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), Ishmael Reed's narrator leaves the reader in the dark as to how it all turns out, though it certainly does not bode well. Indeed, despite the playful, ludic tone of Reed's treatment of Ellison's novel, the absent object in Reed's poem is no less frightening for its comical disappearance, quite the contrary. Tricked into the voracious maw of history simply by sympathizing with its pitiful state, the narrator becomes one with its appetite, corporeally contained and conceptually absorbed, shifting from raw to cooked (or, perhaps, raw to eaten) in the space of a single prefix.

In these two brief stanzas, Reed's parody not only condenses Ellison's novel into a tight binary system of metaphorical oppositions, it also connects the dualism formed by this construct back to its own rhetorical tradition within African-American poetics. As noted by Gates in *Figures in Black*, Reed's poem caricatures the either/or dualism of W. E. B. Du Bois's "double-consciousness" by metaphorically connecting the existentialist dualism of in-/visibility in Ellison's *Invisible Man* to the essentialist dualism of "two-ness" described by Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*

(1903).[175] In so doing, Reed's poem draws a direct, parodic parallel between these rhetorical formulations, pitting them against one another and, thereby, subjecting both to an aggressively (self-)mocking critique. As Gates writes in *The Signifying Monkey*, "Reed's poem parodies, profoundly, both the figure of the black as outsider [Ellison] and the figure of the divided self [Du Bois]. For, he tells us, even these are only tropes, figures of speech, rhetorical constructs like 'double-consciousness,' and not some preordained reality or thing" (238). Avoiding a portrayal of this dialectic of otherness and "double-consciousness" as either concretely real or purely imagined, Reed's poem warns the reader of the risk of mistaking rhetoric for reality while at the same time recognizing the very real threat of certain formulations of imagination.

One such threatening formulation confronted by Reed in "Dualism" is precisely the rhetoric of this "divided self" as it is imagined by Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk,* "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois 16). In Reed's poem, this pitying, self-othering gaze is precisely the gaze that annihilates autonomous identity. By sympathizing and ultimately identifying with this sense of division, one becomes divided, surrogated to an incomplete, artificial image of oneself and, thereby, separated from any coherent sense of identity. To Du Bois, it is precisely through this falsely reflexive act of "double-consciousness" that one's own identity (or, "soul," in Du Bois's idiom) is seen to be pitiful, contemptible, and eternally other. Applying this construct as the rhetorical ground for his parody, in Reed's poem this self-dividing transformation from pitying to pitiful (as in Du Bois), along with its implied shift from alienated

[175] See Gates, *Figures in Black*, 275-76; W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches,* 16.

exclusion to self-annihilating inclusion (as it figures in the epilogue to Ellison's *Invisible Man*), is re-cast as a process of historical appropriation.

Replacing Du Bois's term, "soul" (as it occurs in the passage above), with the figure of "history," Reed's poem suggests that a measuring of one's (invisible) expereince by the historiographic tape of an othering, dialectical sense of history (i.e., the totalizing [Hegelian] sense of historicity created and enforced by the highly visible "cage" of [Western] historiography) effects a destructive appropriation of the outsider's experience. This experience, defined as the outsider's history in Reed's arrangement, sustains the caged beast of historiographic totality by exchanging its alterity for inclusion. As this exchange occurs, the invisible outsider—along with the autonomous identity and distinct history that attend the outsider's exclusion from the realm of a more visible, mainstream discourse—is negated by inclusion into its opposite. As Robert Elliot Fox comments in *Conscientious Sorcerers*:

> [The] achievements of blacks and other oppressed peoples have been frequently expropriated by whites. History is also 'herstory,' *their* story, individual tales of joy and sadness, confusion and survival that constitute the collective narrative of a people. Appropriation of a people's history, Reed insists, is a denial of their identity. (72, Fox's emphasis)

For the outsider, identification (whether imagined or material) with such a process of historical appropriation is, in Reed's poem, sufficient to result in one's own erasure.

In his discussion of the poem in *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates traces the key element in Reed's parody of Du Bois and Ellison to a statement made by the anonymous narrator in the epilogue to Ellison's *Invisible Man*: "Now I know men are different and that all life is divided and that only in division is there true health"

(Ellison 576).[176] According to Gates, Reed's poem parodically contradicts Ellison's narrator by exposing the truly destructive nature of the dualism implicit in such a figuration of division. Gates writes, "For Reed, this belief in the reality of dualism spells death" (*Signifying* 238). However, one point that Gates neglects in his study and which highlights the interaction of the rhetorical figures in this poem as absolutely key to an understanding of Reed's position, both poetically and politically, is the poem's ironic play on the concept of division.

For, to the extent that the poem argues that the (self-)division inherent in "double-consciousness" results in self-negation, such a rhetoric of division is clearly condemned (albeit comically) by Reed's ironic arrangement. And yet, in the original context of *Invisible Man*, the division that Ellison's narrator is referring to (especially in the line from the epilogue quoted by Gates) is not so much a division of one's self in the sense forwarded by Du Bois, but rather a division from the inherently violent processes of social and racial integration (re-interpreted as historical appropriation in Reed's poem) which the invisible man's grandfather describes in the prologue to the novel:

> I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open. (Ellison 16)[177]

Nagged and chastised by his grandfather's dying words throughout the novel, in the epilogue there is a clear sense that Ellison's narrator has finally accepted his

[176] See Gates, *Figures*, 276.

[177] This passage from Ellison's novel, which Reed parodically re-interprets (i.e., signifies upon) repeatedly in his writing, figures in a similar way in the poem, "Crocodiles," published in Reed's 1973 collection, *Chattanooga*: "A crocodile dont hunt / Him's victims / They hunts him / All he do is / Open he jaws." See Reed, *Chattanooga: Poems*, 43.

grandfather's solution to the question of division (despite his supposition of the relative "health" to be found in division). And by leaving his well-lit underground it is clear that the narrator is making a consciously self-sacrificing (yet sincerely hopeful) decision to emerge from his otherness and re-enter the world as a potential agent of change with a "socially responsible role to play" (Ellison 581). Ultimately acquiescing to his grandfather's logic, Ellison's narrator begrudgingly allows that change can, in all likelihood, only be effected through such a process of self-sacrificing integration (i.e., from within the "lion's mouth"). And so, with this as his chosen fate, he leaves behind the safe, peripheral liminality of his place of "hibernation" and ventures out into the chaos of the mainstream (Ellison 580-81).

As previously discussed, Reed's parodic interpretation of the invisible man's dilemma clearly indicates this decision to be the narrator's undoing. So where or what exactly is Reed's position vis-à-vis the question of division? In order to answer this question it is necessary to return to the concept of "signifying" as mentioned earlier in the chapter.

Through an extended synthesis of earlier socio-linguistic and anthropological studies of "signifying" by scholars such as Roger D. Abrahams, Kimberly W. Benson, and Claudia Mitchell-Kernan,[178] Gates offers the following (dualistically nuanced) definition in *Figures in Black*: "The Afro-American rhetorical strategy of signifying is a rhetorical act that is not engaged in the game of information giving. Signifying turns on the play and chain of signifiers, and not on some supposedly transcendent signifier" (238). With its own highly sophisticated social and semantic

[178] See Mitchell-Kernan, "Signifying," in *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore,* 310-28; Mitchell-Kernan, *Language Behavior in a Black Urban Community* 87-138; and Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle: Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia*, 51-52, 66-67, 264.

rules of play, the game of signifying (also occasionally denoted by Gates and others as "signifyin[g]" and/or "Signifying" as a way of registering its multiple functions both within, between, and above rhetorical and dialogical acts)[179] can be used to communicate, confuse, interpret, and encode via the physical and/or verbal deployment of an array of rhetorical tropes and dialogical tactics.[180] As Gates writes:

> Signifying is a trope in which are subsumed several other rhetorical tropes, including metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony (the master tropes), and also hyperbole and litotes, and metalepsis. . . . To this list we could easily add aporia, chiasmus, and catechesis, all of which are used in the ritual of signifying. (*Figures* 236)

While signifying play can be analyzed and explored in terms of its rhetorical structures and tropological interactions (as Gates does quite successfully), Gates is also careful to point out that the rhetorical game of signifying—like the dissimulation, parodic displacement, and intertextual citation that often occur in written and verbal forms of irony—typically takes place in the space between written and verbal events (*Figures* 238). In fact, this unspoken and often strategically unspeakable area of language is precisely the space that signifying play most effectively occupies. As Mitchell-Kernan writes in "Signifying":

> The Black concept of signifying incorporates essentially a folk notion that the dictionary entries for words are not always sufficient for interpreting meanings or messages, or that meaning goes beyond such interpretations. Complimentary remarks may be delivered in a left-

[179] In her own study of signifying, Mitchell-Kernan notes: "Since many of the terms are used on more that one level of contrast (i.e., as labels for the game or speech event and as labels for tactics employed in the game) when they are used superordinately (as labels for the speech event) they will be capitalized." See Mitchell-Kernan, "Signifying," 312.

[180] As Roger D. Abrahams writes: "Signifying seems to be a Negro term, in use if not in origin. It can mean any number of things; in the case of the toast about the signifying monkey, it certainly refers to the trickster's ability to talk with great innuendo, to carp, cajole, needle, and lie. It can mean in other instances the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point. It can mean making fun of a person or situation. Also it can denote speaking with the hands and eyes, and in this respect encompasses a whole complex of expressions and gestures. Thus it is signifying to stir up a fight between neighbors by telling stories; it is signifying to make fun of a policeman by parodying his motions behind his back; it is signifying to ask for a piece of cake by saying, 'my brother needs a piece of cake.'" See Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle,* 51-52.

> handed fashion. A particular utterance may be an insult in one context and not another. What pretends to be informative may intend to be persuasive. The hearer is thus constrained to attend to all potential meaning carrying symbolic systems in speech events—the total universe of discourse. (314)[181]

The epistemological fluidity of signifying relies upon a constantly shifting interplay of implication and allegation, insinuation and distraction, all of which takes place at the meta-level of discourse.

The signifying use of the word *apple*, for example, does not simply function as a semiotic signifier for the signified object of a phenomenological apple, but exists at the verbal nexus of every possible connotation of apple and apple-ness: as a food metaphor; as a symbol from and/or for the Bible; as a metalepsis implying sex or virginity; as an allusion to Max Apple, Apple Records, or Apple Computers, Inc.; as the makings for a pun on the euphemistic phrase "a pull," and so on. Each of the items in this chain of dynamic signifiers, in turn, leads to another set of potential semantic relations. The signifying use of *apple* in a hip-hop cipher as an allusion to Apple Records, for example, might yield any of a number of further implications depending on the context of its usage (e.g., as a reference to pop music and/or the pop sensibility, as a reference to The Beatles, as a reference to the "whiteness" of such a record company [in contrast to the "blackness" of record companies such as Def Jam or Death Row], etc.). Furthermore, not only does each signifying reference rely upon the context of its utterance, each instance of that reference also stands in relation to previous similar utterances (i.e., signifying is often done upon well-

[181] This quote from Mitchell-Kernan's "Signifying" also figures in a similar context in the "Black Structures of Feeling" chapter of Gates's *Figures in Black*. See Gates, *Figures*, 240.

known, precedent uses of a given trope or metaphor).[182] This type of playful citation, as both Gates and Mitchell-Kernan attest, is often both a nod of recognition to past players of the game as well as a critical revision of their stylistics and signature rhetorical tactics.[183]

In order to successfully navigate the various semantic and rhetorical levels of this complicated game the player must display a comprehension of the double-voiced message (or "left-handed" distraction) masked as information and re-deploy that message. Essential to this process is an ability to decipher the double meaning hidden behind a given code and either continue the signifying play within that code or shift the play to a new rhetorical matrix (e.g., apples to cherries; record labels to labeling). All the while, in order to keep the game moving, each signifying act must be played forward at the same time as it is played back upon the event, trope, or situation that initiated the play. The game of signifying, in other words, can only be successfully played by responding in kind—that is, by responding with equal duplicity and/or by resetting the code—and at every point (like Schlegel's irony) it is always possible to misread the message entirely by taking it seriously (i.e., following the flow of signifiers in the wrong [purely literal/purely figurative] direction) and, thereby, failing to properly respond to the implicit duplicity of the message.

As suggested by Gates, signifying play typically takes place at the liminal crossroads of the figurative and the factual (*Figures* 236-37). This is precisely why

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[182] One brief example of this in the context of the hip-hop cipher might be the playful use of the phrase "chamber music." As this phrase has been previously used by several members of the group Wu-Tang Clan as a play on the classical music genre and to refer to both the sound of gunfire (i.e., the percussive "music" made as a bullet exits a gun's chamber) as well as to the Wu-Tang Clan's own debut album, *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)* (1993), any subsequent use of the phrase "chamber music" in a hip-hop cipher will contain an implicit link to these previous uses and their various implications.

[183] See Mitchell-Kernan, "Signifying," 314-16; Gates, *Figures*, 244-50.

the signifying relations in Reed's poem cannot be entirely rectified and why any definite sense of the poem's "true" intent remains elusive to the critic. Slippery and elastic, "Dualism" appears mythical when approached from a literal standpoint and literal when approached from a mythical standpoint.[184] This indeterminacy, according to Gates, is ultimately attributable to the dual-voiced nature of signifying as a self-reflexive mode of meta-discourse, or, to put it in other (yet no less circular) terms, the indeterminacy of the signifying speech act relates directly to its medial status as a scripted yet speakerly oral text (*Figures* 249).[185] As Gates explains:

> The determinate meanings often sought in criticism often run counter to the most fundamental values of the tradition as encased in myth. In this sense, the literal and the figurative are locked in a Signifyin(g) relation, the myths and the figurative Signified upon by the real and literal, just as the vernacular tradition Signifies upon the tradition of letters, and as figures of writing and inscription are registered, paradoxically, in an oral literature. This is another example of the presence of the dual voice. (*Signifying* 22)

Though obviously rich in a variety of narratological implications, the most significant aspect of this assessment (for the purposes of the following exploration of Reed's early novels) is the correlation that Gates traces through the duality of voice inherent in the signifying, speakerly text to what Mikhail Bakhtin describes as the "hidden polemic" within the parodic structure of double-voiced discourse.[186]

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[184] Gates relates this sense of rhetorical indeterminacy to the hallucinated sermon ("The Blackness of Blackness") in the prologue of Ellison's *Invisible Man*: "blackness is...an' blackness ain't. . . . it will…an' it won't. . . . it do...an' it don't," see Gates, *Signifying*, 235-37; Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 9-10.

[185] Reed acknowledges the speakerly aspect of his writing in referring to his second novel, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969), as: "an oral book, a talking book." In an interview for *Black World* magazine, Reed states: "I based the book [*Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*] on old radio scripts in which the listener constructed the sets with his imagination; that's why 'radio'; also because it's an oral book, a talking book . . . there's more dialogue than scenery or description." See Reed, "Ishmael Reed: A Self Interview," 25; see also Gates*, Figures*, 249.

[186] See Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse Typology in Prose," in *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, 190; see also Gates*, Figures*, 247-49.

Quoting at length from Bakhtin's "Discourse Typology in Prose," Gates declares Bakhtin's concept of hidden polemic to be absolutely crucial to an understanding of the intertextual relations and critical revisions that occur within Reed's double-voiced, highly vernacular parody (*Figures* 247). Defining this concept, Bakhtin writes:

> In hidden polemic the author's discourse is oriented toward its referential object, as in any other discourse, but at the same time each assertion about the object is constructed in such a way that, besides its referential meaning, the author's discourse brings a polemical attack to bear against another speech act, another assertion, on the same topic. Here one utterance focused on its referential object clashes with another object on the grounds of the referent itself. That other utterance is not reproduced; it is understood only in its import. ("Discourse" 199)[187]

As established by Gates, consideration of the double-voiced configuration of this hidden polemic is crucial to an understanding of the type of intertextual parody employed in novels such as *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, and *Mumbo Jumbo*. However, while Gates limits the scope of his analyses primarily to the intertextual relationships Reed shares with previous African-American texts and traditions, it is the contention of this chapter (without in any way arguing against Reed's rightful inclusion within the African-American literary tradition and with a full awareness of the tremendous importance of this canon and its continued development) that the metafictional structure of Reed's parody also presents an obvious case for an analysis of Reed's writing in relation to the high ironic mode. For, as already discussed in this dissertation's previous analyses of the works of Coover and Barthelme, the parodic mechanism of Bakhtin's double-voiced

[187] See Gates, *Figures*, 247.

polemic, which Gates locates in Reed's fiction, is also fundamental to the intertextual and metafictional structures of high ironic narrative.

By expanding Gates's appraisal of Reed as another in a distinguished line of signifying African-American literary parodists (a tradition that Gates follows back through the works of Reed, Ellison, James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Jean Toomer, and Zora Neale Hurston to the writers of some of the first "black experience" narratives published in America during the eighteenth century),[188] this chapter seeks to orient its analysis of Reed's novels to within the context of his place in the tumultuous American arts scene of the 1960s and early 70s. This is not to say that Reed's writing during this period is in any way a direct product of the influences and theories of those times (whether African-American, Anglo-American, Franco-American, or otherwise). For the most part Gates's placement of Reed squarely within the African-American canon is justified and explains far more about the various forms and functions of Reed's writing than it conceals. Nevertheless, it is impossible (indeed, it would be doing Reed's writing a blatant, critical injustice) to ignore the striking formal and political similarities between the works of Coover, Barthelme, and Reed.[189] For as Neil Schmitz contends in his essay, "Neo-HooDoo: The Experimental Fiction of Ishmael Reed":

> . . . contemporary Afro-American writing is as diverse and generally parodic in its modes as contemporary Anglo-American writing—the milieu and idiom differs, not the fictional tactics. Reed's . . . [writing] moves finally along the same metafictive angle that Pynchon and

[188] See Gates, *Figures*, 248-49.

[189] It should also be noted that, while it is not the project attempted here in this chapter, an entirely justifiable case might well be made describing the significant influence that the African-American canon (e.g., Ellison, Wright, Toomer, Hurston, Du Bois, et al.) has had in the shaping the parodic, Anglo-American literature of the 1960s and 70s (especially as this influence figures in the works of writers such as Barthelme, Brautigan, Coover, Tim O'Brien, Grace Paley, Thomas Pynchon, and Kurt Vonnegut). Such a study would offer another very interesting angle through which to view the emergence of the type of high ironic metafiction that developed during this period.

> Barthelme [and Coover] take in their fiction, probing folklore and myth with the same seriocomic intent, to wrench from them their own truths. (Schmitz 139)[190]

As Schmitz notes in his essay, the "fictional tactics" employed by Barthelme, Coover, and Reed do not merely display a number of formal similarities, their common project of "probing folklore and myth" also indicates a shared metafictional goal of anatomizing precedent narrative forms and exploring the veracity of all textual formulations, especially those purporting to contain or convey notions of "truth." Indeed, what makes a consideration of the works of Ishmael Reed absolutely crucial to a full exploration of the high ironic mode is the way in which his writing ties together the metafictional forms and abstract re-formulations previously analyzed in the works of Coover and Barthelme.

As the preceding chapters of this dissertation have described, the high ironic is a mode of textual revision predicated upon a formally parodic matrix of metaphorical deconstruction, metafictional collage, and an expansion of narratorial agency. While this parodic matrix is not unlike the signifying intertextual relations described by Gates as connecting works such as Jean Toomer's *Cane*, Richard Wright's *Native Son*, and Ellison's *Invisible Man* into a coherent literary tradition (*Signifying* 87-88), it is proposed that Reed's synthesis of metaphorical deconstruction, metafictional collage, and narratorial expansion is, in terms of form, most comparable to that of Barthelme and Coover. For the question of concern here, in this chapter, is not one of determining which literary tradition into which Reed's fiction might best be placed, but rather where his fiction is located in terms of form.

[190] "[Coover]" has been inserted here as Robert Coover, as well as *Pricksongs & Descants*, are both mentioned in the same context and within the same paragraph that this quote is taken from. See Schmitz, "Neo-HooDoo: The Experimental Fiction of Ishmael Reed," 139.

In fact, formal comparison of Coover's *Pricksongs & Descants* and Barthelme's *Snow White* to the parodic mechanisms at play in Reed's *The Free-lance Pallbearers*, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down,* and *Mumbo Jumbo* reveals that each of these works stands at a similar distance to its own tradition, both structurally and transideologically. Nevertheless, none of these works can be said to be outside of the tradition that it also subverts and critiques. As already discussed in chapter three, Coover's parodic intertextual relations with the fairy tale genre in *Pricksongs & Descants*, with Western myth and legend in works such as *Ghost Town*, and with historiographic forms of narrative in *The Public Burning*, are best viewed as attempts to anatomize the literary traditions from which these forms derive, thereby re-visiting and revising the creative potential of the metaphors upon which these traditions are built. Likewise, as described in the foregoing chapter, Barthelme's fragmented explorations of both novel and narrative in *Snow White* and in the stories collected in *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts* and *City Life* (among others) cannot be separated from the forms and traditions being parodied. The works of Coover and Barthelme, like those of Reed, are part and parcel of the very traditions they seek to parodically redress.

One of the points stressed throughout this dissertation has been this relation between form and tradition, for it is precisely this gap that postmodern parody most frequently exploits. As specified by Linda Hutcheon in *The Politics of Postmodernism*, postmodern forms of parody are engaged in a repetition with a difference, never a nostalgic return, and a major part of this engagement is a critical investigation of the traditions from which contemporary forms have emerged:

> [The postmodern] reprise of the past of art is not nostalgic, it is always critical. It is also not ahistorical or de-historicizing; it does not

> wrest past art from its original historical context and reassemble it into some sort of presentist spectacle. Instead, through a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference. (89)

Like the dual-voiced interactions in signifying play, postmodern parody contains an intrinsic recognition of the influence and historical resonance of the forms and traditions being parodied.[191] As Hutcheon is careful to note in her study, "As [a] form of ironic representation, parody is doubly coded in political terms: it both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies" (97). Hutcheon's approach to postmodern parody highlights one of the unavoidable paradoxes of ironic critique (one shared with the process of signifying): it is always—for better or worse—a legitimization of its target; for it is impossible to attack, revise, and/or subvert something (even in the most violent, antagonistic terms) without first identifying it and recognizing its influence.

As discussed previously, such a process is clearly at work within the signifying textual relations described by Gates and is also present in the parodic arrangement of Bakhtin's hidden polemic. Indeed, part of the utility of Bakhtin's explanation of the hidden polemic is the way in which it allows the critic to differentiate between the two voices of the parodic text and, thereby, triangulate the terms of the intertextual relationship between the parodic text, the source material, and the referent.

[191] In many ways echoing Hutcheon's definition of postmodern parody in his *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates writes: "When one text Signifies upon another text, by tropological revision or repetition and difference, the double-voiced utterance allows us to chart discrete formal relationships in Afro-American literary history. Signifyin(g), then, is a metaphor for textual revision." See Gates, *Signifying,* 88.

As Bakhtin describes in the passage quoted earlier, the dual voice of the parodic text is engaged with the referent on two levels. On the primary level, the parodic text relates to the referent satirically, often through the tone, style, and the voices of its narration. On the secondary level, what Bakhtin describes as the text's hidden polemic, is the indirect parodic relation of the text to its referent through its intertextual relation to a set of precedent forms (i.e., the ostensible source material of the parody). This relation is often discernable in the structural similarity between the narrative forms of the parodic text and those of its source material. In this sense, the parodic text following this pattern is engaged with the referent on both a direct satirical level, as well as on an indirect, formally polemical level.

This tripartite structure is structurally analogous to the arrangement of the metafictional "core-response" as outlined in the second chapter of this dissertation. For, as discussed in this earlier chapter, the inherently parodic structure of metafiction typically stands in a similar relation to both the source material—to which it corresponds—and the referent—to which it responds. While Gates is correct in his analysis of the signifying hidden polemic that connects the works of Toomer, Wright, and Ellison (et al.) into a coherent canon (i.e., as a literary repository of texts directly concerning the African-American experience; textually exemplified in the narrative pattern of "the black experience novel"),[192] analysis of Reed's fiction shows that his relation to this canon—like the critical difference in "core-response" that delineates the work of mythopoesis from the work of metafiction—is not one of a direct correspondence (or, in other words, an earnest advancement of "the black

[192] Gates writes, "Much of the Afro-American literary tradition can be read as successive attempts to create a new narrative space for representation of the recurring referent of Afro-American literature, the so-called black experience." See Gates, *Figures,* 248.

experience novel" as handed down from writers such as Hurston, Toomer, Wright, and Ellison), but is instead a self-mocking, parodic attack against the ideological limitations and formal conventions of this canon. While any such attack, as Hutcheon's statement reminds, is also a critical legitimization, nevertheless, Reed's fiction, like that of Coover and Barthelme, is involved in a legitimization that does not take the truths of the canon as self-evident but instead subjects them to intense ironic scrutiny and comic ridicule.

The Signifyin(g) Relations Between Ellison's *Invisible Man* and *Reed's The Free-Lance Pallbearers*

This is especially the case in Reed's debut novel, *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* (1967; hereafter referred to as, *Pallbearers*). In this novel Reed's ironic narrative playfully deconstructs conventional notions of black identity and satirically undermines the intellectual and moral integrity of "the black experience novel."[193] In fact, pushing the metaphor of "attack" to its extreme, it might even be more accurately said that Reed's *Pallbearers* takes a Menippean bazooka to "the black experience novel" and re-assembles the scattered pieces into a self-reflexive, carnivalesque narrative collage.

The main parodic target of Reed's Menippean blast, as several critics have pointed out, is clearly Ellison's *Invisible Man*.[194] And the traces of Ellison's novel

[193] See Gates, *Signifying,* 218; Martin, "FreeLance PallBearer," 36; Schmitz, "Neo-HooDoo," 128.
[194] Robert Elliot Fox writes in *Conscientious Sorcerers*: "On at least one level, *Pallbearers* is an extended parody of *Invisible Man*. . . . The advice of Sam's mother to her son on her deathbed parodies the advice given to Invisible Man's family by his dying grandfather; Invisible Man's expulsion from college is paralleled by Bukka's resignation; Bukka's 'crying-the-blues' recalls Trueblood; his job emptying bedpans parallels Invisible Man's job in the factory basement; Hairyman's recruitment of Bukka on the basis of his speech is a counterpart to Brother Jack's recruitment of Invisible Man into the Brotherhood; I am even tempted to hear linguistic echoes of

are discernibly present in the overall narrative structure of *Pallbearers* as well as (as both Gates and Schmitz also note) in the faux "confessional mode" of the novel's narration.[195] However, far from playing it safe with his narration, Reed's novel is peppered with frantic expository sketches, self-consciously surreal dream sequences, and awkward, narratorial code switches between stereotypically Anglo-American and African-American dialects and idioms. And as far as the high ironic expansion of the narratorial power of action is concerned, *Pallbearers* pushes its narration right to the very edge of the "receiveable" (see chapter two), skirting the outer perimeter of the mode like a metafictional roller-derby with a party of HooDoo zombies in a race to the death, rolling wild and wreaking havoc in every turn.

Told from beyond the grave by the novel's protagonist and narrator, Bukka Doopeyduk, the narrative dashes from one tangled verbal exchange to another. However, as Schmitz comments in his study of *Pallbearers,* the result is not a polished assembly of convoluted colloquial episodes (such as in Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* or Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*), nor does the narration ever approach the pathological tone or stylistics of a true confessional narrative (in the mode of Wright's *Native Son* or Ellison's *Invisible Man*), but instead *Pallbearers* more closely approximates a vernacular bedlam of wanton "funkyness," "talltalk," and "roughened discourse" (130). As Schmitz writes:

Ellison's opening sentence, 'I am invisible man,' in Reed's opener, 'I live in HARRY SAM.'" See Fox, *Conscientious Sorcerers,* 40. See also Hume "Ishmael Reed," 507, 516; Gates, *Figures,* 242; and Schmitz, "Neo-HooDoo," 128-29.

[195] In his assessment of *Pallbearers*, Gates notes: "*The Free-lance Pallbearers* is, above all else, a parody of the confessional mode which is the fundamental, undergirding convention of Afro-American narrative, received, elaborated upon, and transmitted in a chartable heritage from Briton Hammon's captivity narrative of 1760, through the antebellum slave narratives, to black autobiography, and into black fiction, especially that of Hurston, Wright, Baldwin, and Ellison." Gates, *Signifying,* 218. See also Schmitz, "Neo-HooDoo," 126.

> The language of *Pallbearers* is an orchestration of idiolects, conflicting types of speech that caricature their speakers. . . . Brought back from the novelistic life he so badly lived, Doopeyduk retells [the] novel like a theatrical impressionist, a mimic skillfully doing all its characters. (Schmitz 131)[196]

And like the "pedants, bigots, cranks, parvenus, virtuosi, enthusiasts, rapacious and incompetent professional men of all kinds" that make up the cast of the Menippean satire in Northrop Frye's definition of the form (*Anatomy* 309), *Pallbearers* is filled to brimming with cartoon mouthpieces, each of them out deceive, or, "dupe" the narrative protagonist.

In parodying the company of shadowy apparitions that people *Invisible Man* and that continually attempt to rally Ellison's narrator to their respective causes (e.g., Mr. Norton, Mr. Emerson, Jr., Dr. Bledsoe, Lucius Brockway, Brother Jack, and Ras The Exhorter/Destroyer, among others), Reed's novel is crowded with self-serving opportunists and those all too willing to sacrifice Doopeyduk (both literally and figuratively) in order to get ahead. However, while the characters in *Invisible Man* are portrayed with a morally indistinct opacity of intention balanced with an acute lexical precision to their respective characterizations and personalized speech patterns (not unlike the type of characterizations found in Kafka's *The Trial* and Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*), the caricatures in *Pallbearers* (as in the satires of Swift and Voltaire, as well as in postmodern Menippean satires such as Coover's "Panel Game" and Barthelme's *The Dead Father*) are depthless,

[196] Although Schmitz is quick to denigrate Reed for his ventriloquism, Reed's characterization in *Pallbearers* actually follows the typical form of the Menippean satire. As Northrop Frye's notes in *Anatomy of Criticism*: "The Menippean satire deals less with people as such than with mental attitudes. . . . The Menippean satire thus resembles the confession in its ability to handle abstract ideas and theories . . . . The Menippean satirist sees [evil and folly] as diseases of the intellect, as a kind of maddened pedantry which the *philosophus gloriosus* at once symbolizes and defines." See Frye, *Anatomy,* 309.

inarticulate, and betray their intentions almost immediately—the only mystery in Reed's novel is the extremity of its madness.

Further accentuating this intertextual lunacy is the impression that several of the characters in *Pallbearers* seem to have been rather unceremoniously wrenched from Ellison's serious, low ironic narrative and roughly re-installed in the pages of Reed's high ironic madhouse—Ellison's Liberty Paint company doctor is recast as Reed's Dr. Christian, Ellison's Brother Jack as Reed's Cipher X, Mr. Norton as Aboreal Hairyman, Reverend Barbee as Eclair Porkchop, Rinehart as Elijah Raven—the appearance of each throwing off signifying sparks of mimicry, symbolic citation, and allusion in every scene in which they materialize. And caught in the middle of this twisted, parodic miasma of buffoons, bozos, and burlesque charlatans is Bukka Doopeyduk, king of the dupes.

Perpetually hoodwinked and as monotonous in his single-minded response to the world as his aviary namesake, Doopeyduk's posthumous narration follows the course of his fantastic (former)[197] adventures in the never-never-land of HARRY SAM. Beginning, as does *Invisible Man*, with a brief prologue of sorts, *Pallbearers* opens with a short biography of HARRY SAM, dictatorial leader (a tenuous spoof of Richard Nixon)[198] and eponymous symbol of the Technicolor hallucination within which Doopeyduk and the other characters battle for survival:

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[197] In his essay, "Images of Subversion: Ishmael Reed and the Hoodoo Trickster," James Lindroth notes: "Duppy [is] a hoodoo word for the spirit 'who returns from the grave and causes mischief,'" (191). Reed's signifying use of "Duppy," Lindroth also notes, is traceable to Hurston's definition of the term in *Tell My Horse* (1938). See Lindroth, "Images of Subversion," 191; Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, 54-74.

[198] Fox writes: "HARRY SAM is Uncle Sam—America—as well as a cartoon version of various U. S. presidents. It also brings to mind 'Sam's plantation,' an expression used by a minstrel of the Civil War period to describe the Union . . . . SAM, however, is identifiable with more than simply the nation or its chief of state; it is a mode of consciousness, characterized by a desire for mastery and control." See Fox, *Conscientious Sorcerers*, 42.

> I live in HARRY SAM. HARRY SAM is something else. A big not-to-be-believed out-of-sight, sometimes referred to as O-BOP-SHE-BANG or KLANG-A-LANG-A-DING-DONG. SAM has not been seen since the day thirty years ago when he disappeared into the John with a weird ravaging illness.
>
> The John is located within an immense motel which stands on Sam's Island just off HARRY SAM. (*Pallbearers* 1)

It is to this island that the course of Doopeyduk's trials will eventually lead, thus guiding him to the fulfillment of the prophecy foretold at the close of the first section of the novel:

> Legend has it that when the fateful swimmer makes it from Sam's Island to HARRY SAM . . . old men will sneeze, swoop up their skiffles and rickety sticks, then lickety-split to rooms of widow executioners in black sneakers. It is at this time that the Free-Lance Pallbearers will take SAM. (*Pallbearers* 4)

That the fulfillment of this prophecy—like the realization of the vague utopian dream of a scientifically perfected, culturally informed, racially integrated future which drives the narrator in Ellison's novel—would involve a radical overhaul of American society and its systems of governance and control is, however, beyond the meager scope of the protagonist. For, although most of the other characters in *Pallbearers* appear to be aware of the imbalances of power and the network of organizations in place to oppress them, Doopeyduk remains, until the very end of the novel, blind to the reality of his own subjugation (another signifying riff on *Invisible Man*).

Throughout the novel Doopeyduk repeatedly rails against anyone that might dare to question or denigrate what he sees as the pristine purity of HARRY SAM—as a man, a place, and an institution (28, 74, 87-88, 114). And despite his withdrawal from the Harry Sam College, where he was studying as a Nazarene apprentice on track "to becoming the first bacteriological warfare expert of the colored race" (*Pallbearers* 4), he continues to devote himself reverently to his studies of the

Nazarene code. This code, like the obscure doctrines of the Brotherhood in *Invisible Man*, becomes Doopeyduk's shield against the absurd realities that surround him: the abject state of black urban poverty, the poor conditions of the public housing, healthcare, and educational systems, the brazenly racist nature of American foreign policy, and, perhaps most frequently, the brazenly racist nature of American society in general. And whenever he encounters moments of strife or circumstances that he is unable to comprehend (which are numerous), Doopeyduk simply pulls out his Nazarene manual and recites the following set of oaths:

> Harry Sam does not love us. If he did, he'd come out of the John and hold us in his lap. We must walk down the street with them signs in our hands. We must throw back our heads and loosen our collars. We must bawl until he comes out of there and holds us like it was before the boogeyman came on the scene and everybody went to church and we gave each other pickle jars each day and nobody had acne nor bad breath and cancer was just the name of a sign. (*Pallbearers* 26, Reed's syntax)

But despite his rabid piety and his complete devotion to the Nazarene order (a pseudo-Christian worldview of scientific progress and mono-cultural [Anglo-Saxon] supremacy; not unlike the philosophy of the "Wallflower Order" in *Mumbo Jumbo*), his living conditions do not improve. In quick succession he loses his wife (the unabashed Fanny Mae; in many ways a downtown version of Ellison's uptown Sybil), he loses his position as an orderly at a mental hospital (for service at which he was initially awarded an engraved, golden bedpan [57, 92]; an ironic play on the invisible man's briefcase), and thus, being divorced and out of a job, he subsequently loses his apartment in the Harry Sam housing projects (98-99). Doopeyduk ends up alone, unemployed, homeless, and without anywhere to turn, and yet his dedication to HARRY SAM and the Nazarene order is unflagging.

It is at this point in the narrative that Doopeyduk suddenly finds himself an unwitting (in every sense of the term) artist and celebrity. For in his destitution Doopeyduk takes a job as a living stage prop in a theatre production called, "Git It On," organized by a black-acting white artist named Cipher X (93-95). The production (an ad-hoc pastiche of the "battle royale" scene and the final Brotherhood committee meeting in *Invisible Man*) involves Doopeyduk's confinement in a set of stocks, the rapid-fire pelting of his face and arms by a baseball-hurling robot, the screening of Nazi propaganda films, and the broadcasting of anti-white threats from a tape recorder (101-03):

> WHITEY YOU DIE TOMORROW RIGHT AFTER BREAKFAST AND IF YOU DON'T DIE THEN CHOKING ON YOUR WAFFLES DON'T BREATHE A SIGH OF RELIEF AND SAY THANK GOD FOR BUFFERIN 'CAUSE THAT WILL ONLY MEAN THAT YOU WILL MEET YOUR MAKER COME THE VERY NEXT DAY. HEAH THAT. HEAH THAT, WHITEY, ON THE NEXT SUNNY DAY YOU WILL MEET YOUR DEMISE, YOU BEASTS CREATURES OF THE DEEP. 'CAUSE YOU CAN'T HOLD A CANDLE TO US VIRILE BLACK PEOPLE. . . . (102, Reed's typography and syntax)

To Doopeyduk's surprise, the all-white audience reacts with a standing ovation (103). He is immediately inundated with requests for interviews and media appearances, and word quickly gets around to HARRY SAM that a powerful new black personality has emerged on the world's stage (with bruises and cuts to his face). Doopeyduk believes that he has finally made it. But as with the unfortunate protagonist in Coover's "The Marker," everything changes drastically when the authorities enter and lights come on. For with his fame comes an invitation to Sam's Island and an opportunity to enter the hallowed precincts of HARRY SAM's John, a dubious honor it turns out. For although he is respectfully received and venerated with the title of Nazarene Bishop (with the task of repeating to the people of

"Soulsville": "IT'S GOING TO BE ALRIGHT, BY AND BY IN THE SKY. . . . IT'S GOING TO BE ALRIGHT, BY AND BY IN THE SKY" [135]; another oblique reference to Ellison's Reverend Barbee), that night, in the Harry Sam motel, he finds himself surrounded by echoing screams (135). Doopeyduk follows the screams to their source in the basement and, once there, he not only catches HARRY SAM engaged in acts of sexual debauchery (similar to the famous buggery scene in Coover's *The Public Burning* involving Uncle Same and Nixon [*The Public Burning* 650-53]), but he also discovers the putrid, half-eaten corpses of all of the nation's kidnapped children (137-140). Fleeing the scene in terror, Doopeyduk swims back across the Black Bay to the shores of HARRY SAM, and fulfills the prophecy (141-42).

The final section of *Pallbearers* (roughly corresponding to the "Harlem riots" episode in chapter twenty-five of *Invisible Man*) finds Doopeyduk at the head of a vast army of the disenfranchised (144-46). He leads his army through the polluted waters of the bay back to the Harry Sam motel and, upon arrival, the motel is looted (151), HARRY SAM is killed after being chased down a toilet (151), and a new leader is quickly appointed (152). But instead of being exalted as a hero (or assuming the dictatorship, as he briefly fantasizes), Doopeyduk finds himself dangling from meat-hooks in "Emperor Franz Joseph Park," babbling aimlessly to a dwarf named Rapunzel (152-154). Doopeyduk now dead and a new regime now in place, however, nothing seems to have changed. The same fixtures remain, the same helicopters bounce and twirl above the urban skyline, and the same sign blinks from atop the motel (although now, Doopeyduk observes, the sign is written in Chinese):

> EATS-SAVE GREEN STAMPS-BINGO-WED-EATS-SAVE GREEN STAMPS-BINGO-WED-EATS-SAVE GREEN STAMPS-BINGO-WED-EATS-SAVE GREEN STAMPS-BINGO-WED-EATS-SAVE WRITTEN IN CHINESE NO LESS
> (*Pallbearers* 155, Reed's typography and syntax)

While the fate of Doopeyduk's America remains undetermined, one thing at least is certain, his narrative has left the America of Ellison's *Invisible Man* in tatters. For although Doopeyduk is martyred to a causeless cause, his triumph is his narration of the demise of not just a single segment of American culture (e.g., the African-American community), but American culture in general—from the top down.

This America, as Kathryn Hume writes in "Ishmael Reed and the Problematics of Control," is portrayed in *Pallbearers* as consisting of little more than a rigorously guarded set of social, economic, and political controls. These controls are in place, Hume writes, specifically to ensure continuous consumption:

> In the country of HARRY SAM, control manifests itself not just through the hooks of public execution but also through secret cannibalism and sodomy in high places and through the media's shaping of the public mind. . . . Even when Chinese invaders take over the country, the message for the poor is the same: "EATS-SAVE GREEN STAMPS-BINGO-WED." In other words, the poor are urged to consume goods, be consumed, and beget more consumers, while comforting themselves with the promise of luck in a game of chance. (Hume 508)

No recourse to any manner of social, economic, or political control is given to this set of brainwashed consumers. The only things offered to these Americans are the inalienable rights and freedoms of perpetual craving, perpetual illusion, and an endless appetite for more. Broadcast across every imaginable media and woven into the fabric of the meritocratic American philosophy of education (satirized via the

many *philosophi gloriosi* that populate the pages of *Pallbearers*), this social-Darwinism does not, however, describe the survival of the fittest, but rather the survival of the *fattest*—a gorging of the elite on the (social) blood, (economic) body, and (political) spirit of the financially destitute masses (which happen to be disproportionately represented by African-Americans and other minorities). It is this reality that *Pallbearers* confronts through its parody of Ellison's novel and its satire of circa 1966-67 America as seen through the eyes of a circa 1951-52 protagonist.

The high ironic critique in *Pallbearers* also involves a condemnation of what Madhu Dubey defines as, "the narrative strategies of texts such as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* [which] seek to convey an historically specific and materially burdensome reality of social marginalization" (152). According to Dubey, texts such as *Invisible Man, "*. . . reinforce a cluster of modern Western paradigms and modes of thought, including teleological patterns of historical development, totalized models of social order, rationalist epistemologies, and unitary and centered norms of subjectivity" (154). These are precisely the high Modernist conventions that postmodern metafictions such as *Pallbearers* set out to ridicule and debunk.[199] Through radical shifts in idiom, non-linear and/or non-causal narrative progression, and the direct subversion of omniscient third-person forms of narration, Reed's high ironic metafiction in *Pallbearers* strips the "black experience novel" of its concealed ideology and puts it prominently on display.

Like Coover's anatomy of Western forms of myth and magic in "The Magic Poker," and "J's Marriage," or Barthelme's playful dismantling of 1960's American

[199] To a list of contemporaneous "black postmodern" metafictions might be added texts such as LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka's *Tales* (1967), Clarence Major's *All-Night Visitors* (1969), *No* (1972), and *Reflex and Bone Structure* (1975), Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), as well as Samuel R. Delany's *The Einstein Intersection* (1967), *Nova* (1968), and *Dahlgren* (1975).

(fairy tale) archetypes in *Snow White* and in stories such as "The Story Thus Far:", Reed's *Pallbearers* focuses its powers of revision on the neglected reality of spiritual and cultural marginalization that attends the material circumstances of social marginalization. For Reed's signifying, parodic take on Ellison's novel also lays bare the loss of traditional folk-ways, humour and oral culture in the clinical language of social realism, as well as in the clean, scientific lines of the Modernist aesthetic and its consuming logic of totality.

In poems such as "Dualism" and novels such *Pallbearers,* Reed refuses to acquiesce to the American dictate of *eat or be eaten*, and instead offers the reader a third alternative: a philosophy of conscientious objection to the cannibalistic feast of American history that is neither a retreat from an engagement with the past nor in any way a self-negating apology for the fact that the all-you-can-eat American buffet of political imperialism, cultural conquest, and consumerism contains a substantial amount of "dark meat" in its gruesome recipes. In response (to continue the metaphor), *Pallbearers* hi-jacks the textual kitchen where all of these social, economic, and political narratives are prepared and interrupts the process, revealing that the supposedly wholesome goodness of the American apple-pie is actually filled with the gore of the brainwashed millions employed in its preparation.

Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down and the Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic

Reed's sabotage of the cooked-up, palatable poison of American history, as becomes increasingly apparent in works such as *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, *Mumbo Jumbo*, *Flight to Canada* (1975) and *The Terrible Twos* (1982), is not simply reactionary. Reed offers his readers a down-home remedy to counter the poison, a

kind of signifying, necromantic antidote, as it were, in the form of "neo-HooDooism." As Reed indicates in his poem, "The Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic," neo-HooDooism is all- natural, contains no chemical additives, preservatives, or human bi-products, and beyond a few basic components to the recipe (okra, for example), its ingredients are completely up to the preferences of the cook.

> Gombo Févi
>
> A whole chicken—if chicken cannot be had, veal will serve instead; a little ham;
> . . . . . .
> (Don't forget to cut up the gombo or okra.)
>
> Gombo Filé
>
> Same as above except the okra is pul-verised and oysters are used
>
> Why do I call it 'The Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic"?
>
> *The proportions of ingredients used depend upon the cook!*
> (*Conjure* 26, Reed's emphasis and syntax)

At once a theory and a practice, an transideological weapon and a means of cultural defense, Reed's neo-HooDooism is a syncretic gumbo of African-American folk-ways and voodoo evocations.[200] However, as Reed is quick to acknowledge, the neo-HooDoo philosophy may have its roots in Africa, but its contemporary presence is international and pluralistic. As Reed explains in an interview with Joseph Henry:

> The "Neo-Hoodoo" aesthetic comes out of my personal experience and represents my need to find something that I could be at home with. It was something that I became devoted to even before I became

[200] Reginald Martin defines Reed's neo-HooDoo/VooDoo aesthetic along the following lines: "Voodoo, a religion formed under the pressure of degrading social conditions to give human beings dignity and a connection with helpful supernatural forces, thrives because of its syncretic flexibility; its ability to take anything, even ostensibly negative influences, and transfigure them into that which helps the horse [i.e., the subject]. It is bound by certain dogma or rites, but such rites are easily changed when they become oppressive, myopic, or no longer useful to current situations." See Martin, *Ishmael Reed and the New Black Aesthetic Critics,* 71.

> aware of Black Nationalism. "Neo-Hoodoo" is international. So I don't know whether "Neo Hoodooism" comes out of the Black Movement or not. I don't think it does, because I was personally looking for material that no one had used or tried before. It is possible, though, that the Black Movement may have influenced my need to find a different approach to art and writing, since like it, I was ultimately reaching for a different set of aesthetic values in reaction to Western literary standards. (Reed and Henry 86)

Reed's reaction to these "Western literary standards," like much of the writing that emerged from the authors and academics that more actively aligned themselves with the Black Nationalist Movement (e.g., LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Addison Gayle, Jr., and Houston Baker), is as violent in its incendiary militancy as it is fantastic in its forms, images, and rhetoric. In poems such as "Black power poem" (*Conjure* 19), "Neo-HooDoo Manifesto" (*Conjure* 20-25), and "catechism of d neoamerican hoodoo church" (*Conjure* 36-42), Reed blasts the Western cultural establishment for its central role in demonizing black experience, black history, and black culture. In these poems, Reed calls out artists and writers such as Bix Beiderbecke, Irene Castle, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Allen Ginsberg, and Timothy Leary for normalizing racism while at the same time shamelessly stealing from the experiences, histories, and cultures that they simultaneously defame in their works and public statements.

Banging on the white-washed door of the American culture industry, Reed's poetry in *Conjure: Selected Poems, 1963-1970* (1972) and *Chattanooga: Poems* (1973) demands justice with a raised black fist and a raised black voice. As Reed writes in "Black power poem":

> A spectre is haunting america—the spectre of
> neo-hoodooism.
> all the powers of old america have entered into a holy alli
> ance to exorcise this spectre: allen ginsberg timothy leary
> richard nixon edward teller billy graham time magazine the
> new york review of books and the underground press.
> …

> may the best church win. shake hands now and come
> out conjuring (*Conjure* 19)

Reed's Neo-HooDooism, in this context, is a both a rallying cry for political rebellion and a method of spiritual resistance.

In response to what he sees as an ahistorical process of cultural division, racial segregation, and the "compartmentalization that people [both black and white] try to impose on history" (Henry and Reed 89), Reed's neo-HooDooism represents an attempt to counter the dis-integrative forces of Western civilization through a syncretic rectification of history. As is apparent in "Black power poem," this rectification cannot be attempted without a fight against the (Anglo-American) powers that be. However, as is implicit in Reed's poem, the battlefield of the neo-HooDoo resistance is not only external (social, economic, political), it is also internal (personal, spiritual, experiential). And, as Reed states in his interview with Henry, triumph in this proposed battle is subject entirely to the full participation of all members of society, of every shade and origin, without any preference being made for this or that group based upon arbitrary guidelines for acceptability, competence, or relative worth (Henry and Reed 89).

Clearly, the neo-HooDoo concept is a utopian one. And were his HooDoo-utopianism not shot through with signifying irony and other-worldly, occult violence, it would be very difficult not to smile at Reed's grandiose vision. Nevertheless, despite the fact that the majority of his high-flown utopian rhetoric is ironically self-cancelling (by reflexive default) and couched in terms that are deliberately absurd, one of the truly innovative and narratologically significant impacts that Reed's highly rhetorical, ideologically pluralistic, neo-HooDoo vision has had on the

postmodern narrative forms of his period has come about through his syncretic lexical and dialogical combinations of high and low idioms, dialects, and grammars.

Throughout Reed's works, academic discourse is frequently mixed with street slang, hippie-speak is cut with jive-talk, and honky-tonk, ghetto, prairie, and delta dialects are all thrown together into Reed's own unique neo-HooDoo, syncretic Creole. As Reginald Martin writes in *Ishmael Reed and the New Black Aesthetic Critics*:

> Reed extends the notion of syncretism into the level and texture of language he uses, thus creating a kind of contemporary bathetic language, whose principal rules of discourse are taken from the streets, popular music, and television. It is not uncommon to find the formal blend of language mixed with the colloquial because it is Reed's contention that such an occurence in a narrative is more in keeping with the ways contemporary people influenced by popular culture really speak. (73)

While the location of realism in Reed's narratorial syncretism is difficult to accept (the language of Reed's writing being far too conspicuous in its lexical flash and too studied in its rhetoric for any such assessment), nevertheless, Martin's detection of postmodern bathos in Reed's writing is certainly worthy of note.

As in works such as Coover's "Panel Game" and "The Hat Act" (both in *Pricksongs & Descants*) and Barthelme's "Bluebeard" and "Brain Damage," Reed's writing makes frequent use of bathetic sentence structures and lofty sentiments that quickly wind up in the gutter. But these rhetorical ruptures are not merely staged to disappoint the expectations of the reader (although, as discussed in this dissertation's previous explorations of the works of Coover and Barthelme, the upsetting of conventional form does figure prominently in the high ironic mix), it is important to remember that the bathetic forms in the works of Coover, Barthelme, and Reed also function for the sake of humour. And by "signifying on the sign of seriousness," as

Sharon A. Jessee puts it (127), these writers bring the formal down to street level, play the dirty dozens with it, and watch gleefully as the formal collapses, as Frye writes, into an empty heap "of stereotypes, fossilized beliefs, superstitious terrors, crank theories, pedantic dogmatisms, oppressive fashions, and all other things that impede the free movement . . . of society" (*Anatomy* 233).[201]

In *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (hereafter referred to as, *Yellow Back Radio*), Reed traces the "lumber" of these social impediments back to the actual lumberyards and sawdust saloons of the Western novel. Turning his ironic gaze to America's pioneer past, Reed's "break-down" of the Western novel, both as a genre and as a vehicle of Western (i.e., Anglo-European) epistemology, is a characteristically scathing one.[202] Firing wildly from his HooDoo revolver, so to speak, Reed's *Yellow Back Radio* is a full-tilt, signifying assault on the legacy of genocide, greed, religious zealotry, and Enlightenment logic that typify America's murderous westward expansion and continue to underwrite the fiercely selfish, cowboy spirit of American society and the consumer culture that developed during this period in American history (circa 1830 to 1890).

As Kathryn Hume writes in her appraisal of the novel, like in his parody of 1960's America in *Pallbearers,* Reed's *Yellow Back Radio* critically interrogates the historical roots of control as they play out in the formative fables and legends of America ("Ishmael Reed" 508). Hume writes:

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[201] It is worth noting that this passage, from the "Theory of Myths" chapter in Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, is also quoted by Gates in his description of the double-voiced, satirical mechanism of Bakhtin's hidden polemic. See Gates, *Signifying,* 112.

[202] In an interview with John O'Brien, Reed states: "I think the Western novel is tied to Western epistemology, the way people in the West look at the world. So it is usually realistic and has character development and all these things that one associates with the Western novel." See O'Brien, *Interviews with Black Writers*, 172.

> The novel reinterprets the cowboy myths of taming the American West as grotesque and perverse cultural rape. Reed also challenges Christianity as a form of control in this book, opposing the Pope to his Hoodoo protagonist, Loop Garoo, a banished older son of God, cloven-hoofed, but a genuine spiritual power to be reckoned with. The cultural intolerance derived from Christianity and the contempt for those with less sophisticated technology and therefore less firepower are both important targets in this mock Western. . . . ("Ishmael Reed" 508)

As Hume's description of the novel suggests, Reed is loathe to take any prisoners in *Yellow Back Radio*. And yet, *Yellow Back Radio* does not come across as a didactic morality tale or a trite list of socio-cultural grievances (tendencies that *Mumbo Jumbo* and *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* [1974] both suffer from to some extent). Instead, the novel is primarily driven by its attention to the art of storytelling and the mechanics of myth-making.[203] However, as Schmitz points out in his critique, in *Yellow Back Radio,* "Reed does not write mythically—he writes about writing mythically" ("Neo-HooDoo" 132). And this metafictional distance is very carefully maintained throughout the work, informing the style of the novel's satirical narration and carefully directing the terms of the novel's parody of the wild-West romance form.

Narrating Reed's tall tale, is the Loop Garoo Kid:

> A cowboy so bad he made a working posse of spells phone in sick. A bullwhacker so unfeeling he left the print of winged mice on hides of crawling women. A desperado so onery he made the Pope cry and the most powerful of cattlemen shed his head to the Executioner's swine. (*Yellow Back Radio* 9)

[203] In his introduction to *Interviews with Black Writers,* O'Brien writes: "Rather than overtly attacking racism, black writers are more concerned with establishing a black mythology which grapples with the imagination (where myths originate), rather than with politics. There we find Ishmael Reed's novels retelling the story of the old West. . . . The black writer is trying to establish alternate myths to those which have fashioned the Western and American mind so far, myths that will not depict the black man as the symbol of evil and the black race as the threat to civilization." See O'Brien, *Interviews,* xi.

From the outset it is clear that whatever might follow, *Yellow Back Radio* is not going to be an orthodox pulp Western.[204] For in the place of the lonesome, pure-hearted drifter archetype (the typical protagonist of the genre), is Reed's werewolf-hearted, HooDoo comedian—a time-traveling, jet-black, VooDoo-magical, super-cowboy with ESP and a wild dog mojo.

Loop arrives from the supernatural realm of a travelling voodoo circus and sets things right in the town of Yellow Back Radio. But in doing so, his adventures lead him into conflict with the novel's arch-villain, Drag Gibson, a homoerotic hustler and would-be cattle rustler who has taken over the town and claimed its population and property as his own. And paired with Drag in his plot to lynch Loop is Bo Shmo and his "neo-social realist gang" (a satirical signifying on "Imamu" Amiri Baraka, Addison Gayle, Jr., Houston Baker and other "black aesthetic critics" concerned with the issues of black nationalism and the promulgation of "the black experience novel"). Bo and his posse attack Loop for his deliberate narratorial obscurity and his flagrant refusal to construct his narrative in the manner of "those Christian confessionals," or, in other words, as a true-to-life account of the trials of oppression and the agonies of alienation (35). As Bo spouts to Loop in the second chapter:

> The trouble with you Loop is that you're too abstract. . . . Crazy dada nigger that's what you are. You are given to fantasy and are off in matters of detail. Far out esoteric bullshit is where you're at. Why in all those suffering books that I write about my neighborhood and how hard it was every gumdrop machine is in place while your work is a blur and a doodle. . . . All art must be for the end of liberating the masses. A landscape is only good when it shows the oppressor hanging from a tree. (*Yellow Back Radio* 35-36)

[204] In his interview with John O'Brien, Reed defines the "yellow-back" of the title thusly: "Quoting from the Random House *Dictionary of the English Language* definition of the Western novel: 'An inexpensive, often lurid, novel bound in yellow cloth or paper.'" See O'Brien, *Interviews,* 172.

To which Loop replies: "What's your beef with me Bo Shmo, what if I write circuses? No one says a novel has to be one thing. It can be anything it wants to be, a vaudeville show, the six o'clock news, the mumblings of wild men saddled by demons" (36). And as if to demonstrate the power of the imagination over the constraints of mimetic literary convention, Loop conjures a helicopter-flying Indian, Chief Showcase (Loop's occasional spirit helper), who comes to his aid with a canteen of champagne (37).

Much of the novel progresses in a similar manner—Loop is confronted with a thinly veiled allegory or ironically redeployed symbol representing an embarrassing and/or tragic episode from American history (i.e., historiography of the sort usually suppressed by or deleted from the "official" story of the typical U.S. history text; e.g., the impact of automatic firearms on the direction of American domestic policy [23, 92], the distribution of diseased blankets to the Native Americans [169], the various murderous land-grabs disguised as "cessions," "purchases," and "annexations" [42, 91]), and in response Loop uses his supernatural powers to narratorially defeat the wrong-doers and restore spiritual, HooDoo balance to the American frontier.

As in the works of Barthelme, *Yellow Back Radio,* too, is flooded with historical references, pop culture icons, and celebrity appearances. Among the many personalities represented are John D. Rockefeller (39), George Gershwin, (39), Beau Brummels (42), Meriwether Lewis and William Clark (88), Guillaume Apollinaire (103), John Wesley Hardin (114), John Quincy Adams (121), and T. S. Eliot (161). While many of these personalities, as in Barthelme's fiction, are present in the narrative simply to complicate the novel's chronology and remind the reader of the

narrative frame, as a group these names also function quite effectively as an example of the conspicuous scarcity of Black, Asian, and Native American names in the story of the West. And as the novel nears it's final "showdown" sequence, Loop's narrative narrows in on the supposition that most of the factual suppressions, deletions, and obfuscations that have gone into fashioning the blindingly white, Anglo-European myth of the American West might be traced back, like puppet strings, to a bejeweled hand in the Vatican. Enter, the Pope, transhistorical world emperor of whiteness and supreme purveyor of white history in Reed's anti-Christian, HooDoo logic (163-66).[205]

Nevertheless, when the Pope is finally called in by Drag to assist in his bumbling attempts to kill Loop (Drag presenting his Holiness with a "jumbo-size cheeseburger" [148] and a "plastic hotdog" [167] in honor of his visit), the Pope is revealed to be on familiar terms with Loop. In fact, the only reason that the Pope bothered to show up in Yellow Back Radio was to request Loop's help in suppressing the riotous rampages of Black Diane, voodoo high priestess and Loop's former lover (165). Refused assistance by Loop, the Pope immediately returns to Rome. As a result Drag loses his grip on the town and is eventually devoured by two pigs named Matthew and Waldo (a signifying allusion to T. S. Eliot's poem, "Cousin Nancy")[206] and Loop is emancipated at last (174). The novel comes to a close with

[205] Reed states: "[*Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*] is really artistic guerilla warfare against the Historical Establishment. I think the people we want to aim our questioning toward are those who supply the nation with its mind, tutor its mind, develop and cultivate its mind, and these are the people involved in culture. They are responsible for the national mind and they've done very bad things with their propaganda and racism." See O'Brien, *Interviews*, 179.

[206] Also figuring in *Pallbearers, Mumbo Jumbo*, and a number of Reed's other novels, [T. S. Eliot's] Matthew and Waldo are repeatedly portrayed as interlopers privy to the secrets of an Anglo-European conspiracy to displace, control, and/or annihilate all forms of black culture and society. The final lines of Eliot's poem read: "Upon the glazen shelves kept watch / Matthew and Waldo, guardians of the faith, / The army of unalterable law." See Eliot, *Prufrock and Other Observations,* 31.

Loop riding off into the ocean (beneath a sunset, of course) in pursuit of the Pope's ship (177).

The frenetic language and wanton absurdity in *Yellow Back Radio* are certainly on par with that of his first novel and Reed's second novel certainly retains the punchy, aggressive tone of *Pallbearers.* But in comparison, *Yellow Back Radio* is far more fluid in its narrative structures and considerably more episodic in its textual rhythm; each paragraph and, occasionally, even single sentences and unattributed exclamations are printed separately like lines in a radio script or the transcription of an oral performance. This sense of oral performance is also reflected in the overall structure of the novel's narration (a structure quite similar to the narration in Coover's "The Elevator" and reminiscent of the shifting tenses and narratorial perspectives in Barthelme's "At the Tolstoy Museum"). For between paragraphs and even within individual speech acts, the narration flies from verbal tense to verbal tense and rapidly shifts from the descriptive mode to the expository to the persuasive. This mobile grammar lends *Yellow Back Radio* a range to its narration that approaches that of a storyteller on a stage (or in front of a radio microphone). In this way the novel projects and pronounces itself aloud in the reader's ear.

Mumbo Jumbo and the Pseudo-Mythical Collage of (Afro-)American History

In *Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed breaks up the performative fluidity and orality of *Yellow Back Radio*'s narratorial voice by interspersing his text with visual data. This maneuver, which Gates explores extensively in his various assessments of *Mumbo Jumbo*,[207] does not, however, inhibit in any way the full expression of the

[207] See Gates, *Figures,* 247-49; see also Gates, *Signifying,* 22, 88, 223-29.

performative orality of the text. Instead, Reed's introduction of visual material in *Mumbo Jumbo* succeeds in creating a dual-voiced narration that relies as much upon the reader's skills of visual literacy as it does upon the reader's capacity to create meaning from the verbal material of the text. In *Mumbo Jumbo* this visual material (consisting of cartoons, anagrams, photographs, annotated diagrams, statistical data, pamphlets, newspaper clippings, hand-written letters, and much else)[208] visually narrates one half of the novel, while the prose narration of PaPa LaBas, the novel's (ostensible) protagonist and interlocutor, provides the novel with a running, self-reflexive commentary and a certain measure of narrative continuity. The result is a novel with two distinct, intertextually related voices engaged in two discrete parodic acts: visually, the novel suggests a mock-textbook; verbally, the novel suggests a mock-detective story.

Taken separately, the novel narrated by PaPa LaBas, HooDoo houngan and the novel's "noir-ish" transhistorical detective, concerns the sudden re-appearance in the 1920's of a "psychic epidemic," referred to in the novel as "Jes Grew" (4-5). Jes Grew, in many ways a HooDoo sensibility and mode of existence, manifests itself (in the "J. G. C.'s," or, Jes Grew Carriers) as a fit of illogical ecstasy and a desire to dance and celebrate. As stated in the novel's prologue, "It knows no class no race no

[208] Gates's itemized list is even more exhaustive in its detail: "Let us examine the text of *Mumbo Jumbo* as a textbook, complete with illustrations, footnotes, and a bibliography. . . . This documentary scheme of notes, illustrations, and bibliography parodies the documentary conventions of black realism and naturalism, as does Reed's recurrent use of lists and catalogues. . . . Reed's text also includes dictionary definitions, epigraphs, epigrams, anagrams, photoduplicated type from other texts, newspaper clippings and headlines, signs (such as those that hang on doors), invitations to parties, telegrams, 'Situation Reports,' . . . yin-yang symbols, quotations from other texts, poems, cartoons, drawings of mythic beasts, handbills, photographs, dust-jacket copy, charts and graphs, playing cards, a representation of a Greek vase, and a four-page handwritten letter, among still other items." See Gates, *Signifying,* 223.

consciousness. It is self-propagating and you can never tell when it will hit" (5). The prologue continues:

> *Actually Jes Grew was an anti-plague. Some plagues caused the body to waste away; Jes Grew enlivened the host. . . . Some plagues arise from decomposing animals, but Jes Grew is electric as life and is characterized by ebullience and ecstacy. Terrible plagues were due to the wrath of God; but Jes Grew is the delight of the gods.* (*Mumbo Jumbo* 6, Reed's emphasis)

After first arising in Egypt under the nurturing guidance of Osiris, the Jes Grew "disease" was suppressed and driven into hiding (following the murder of Osiris) by the vengeful god Set (mythical usurper and god of chaos) where it lay dormant until the opening of the novel (3-7, 161-191). The re-appearance of the epidemic, which PaPa LaBas observes and interprets through the "investigations" of his narration, is intimately connected with a lost Egyptian text. It is this text (purported to be an anthology of ancient dance moves dictated to Thoth by Osiris [164]) that the Jes Grew epidemic is attempting to reunite with. As stated at the end of the prologue, ". . . *Jes Grew is seeking its words. Its text. For what good is a liturgy without a text?*" (6, Reed's emphasis). By following the spread of the disease, runs the logic of the novel, the Jes Grew text will eventually reveal itself.

Following the course of PaPa LaBas's narration (as the novel's HooDoo mythographer and conspiracy theorist extraordinaire) the entire history of the dualistic struggles between light and dark, Europe and Africa, mind and body, science and spirituality, Set-Apollo and Osiris-Dionysus (24-26, 161-191), is woven together by LaBas into the matrix of a timeless, global conflict between the unseen, chthonic forces of Jes Grew and the machinations of a transhistorical secret society of sun-worshipping (i.e., logic-worshipping) white-supremacists called the Atonists (18, 45) and their military wing, the Wallflower Order (made up of members of the

Knights Templar, and Teutonic Knights [187-89]). According to LaBas, the outbreaks of Jes Grew charted in the novel (and tracked via the "S.R.'s," or, situation reports that punctuate the text [32, 59-60, 77, 105-06, 115, 204-05]) roughly correspond to the flourishing of the voodoo religion in New Orleans during the 1890's, the popular emergence of the Black literary voice during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920's, and the rise of the civil rights, Black arts, and Black power movements of the 1960's (the period into which LaBas's narration shifts at the end of the novel [218]). Erupting and receding like natural (anti-)disasters, these explosions of Jes Grew keep the balance of history in check by countering the solipsistic, fascist, intellectual forces of the Atonists (218). Unfortunately, the actual Jes Grew text is never recovered (the only copy having been burnt by Abdul Sufi Hamid, a Black nationalist radical who is, himself, eliminated by the Atonists during the course of the novel, thereby extinguishing all traces of the Jes Grew text [95, 199-203]). Nevertheless, the story of the possibility of such a sacred text, as La Bas's narration implies, is contained in the pages of *Mumbo Jumbo* itself.

Built in harmony with this pseudo-historical, mock-detective story is the novel's second narrative. Told in a language of pictures, images, icons, and signs, the collage elements in *Mumbo Jumbo* resemble a sort of postmodern American form of hieroglyphics. And like the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs that these pictographic objects evoke, there is a mystery behind every image, a story in the pictures that must be decoded, translated, and interpreted by the reader.

Taken individually the images suggest the scope and variety of a textbook, a manual not unlike the Jes Grew text that PaPa LaBas is searching for (a reading that Reed clearly intended). Taken together, however, they approach the complexity of a

cryptographic code and the mysterious nuance of a secret, cultural history told in images, replete with its enjoyments (e.g., dancing [7, 118], music [77, 184], drama [27, 99], and art [123, 161, 181]), its gods and political monarchs (61, 88, 145, 169), its secret societies (14, 65, 66, 155, 184), its rituals (148, 214, 215), and wars (84, 155, 163, 210). All are catalogued, often with academic citations, references, and footnotes, and there is even a "Partial Bibliography" (219-23) appended to the end of the work (at once signifying on the self-referential nature of academia and subverting the structure of the novel as a conventional form).[209] Taken together with the novel's parody of the noir-detective genre (a construct involving a pun not lost on Reed), these postmodern hieroglyphs provide a very interesting pseudo-historiographic portrait of America.

Because these two parodic forms share a common context (i.e., the reader's incremental construction of the Jes Grew text itself), these forms communicate with each other very effectively despite the fact that very little reference is ever made between them (with the possible exception of the hand-written letter that appears towards the end of the novel [200-03]). For the most part, each "voice" tells its own story independently. Rather than directly referring to one another, these two distinct voices relate primarily on the level of interpretation and in the novel's paring of encryption (the clues) and decryption (the detection), which in turn also ironically signifies on the relationship between text and reader, event and history.

[209] Gates views this bibliography as a further example of Reed's parodic subverstion of Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Gates writes: "Let us examine the text of *Mumbo Jumbo* as a textbook, complete with illustrations, footnotes, and a bibliography. A prologue, an epilogue, and an appended 'Partial Bibliography' frame the text proper, again in a parody of Ellison's framing devices in *Invisible Man*. (Reed supplements Ellison's epilogue with the bibliography, parodying the device both by its repeated presence and by the subsequent asymmetry of *Mumbo Jumbo*.)" See Gates, *Signifying,* 223.

Similar in structure to the array of non-linear trajectories and shifting narratorial voices in Coover's "The Babysitter" and alike in its blurring of myth and history to Barthelme's *Snow White*, Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* meanders from one end of the metafictional spectrum to the other. Also familiar is the collage-like quality of *Mumbo Jumbo*'s highly involved matrix of media and metafictional fragments. The level of participation required of the reader in Reed's novel is also similar to the imaginative visual/verbal navigation required of the reader in Barthelme's illustrated collage narratives, especially Barthelme's anecdotal collages such as "Natural History" and his self-reflexively allegorical pieces such as "At the Tolstoy Museum" and "The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace". As in these high ironic works, Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* is also engaged in narrating a variety of stories via a variety of media from within the metafictional boundaries of a text that only ever coheres in the reader's imagination.[210]

This arrangement insists upon the reader's active participation in the "drama of cognition" (to borrow from Coover) that takes place in the unwritten margins of the novel's dual-voiced discourse. However, the movement from unknowing to knowing in *Mumbo Jumbo* is constantly undermined by the terms of the novel's own textual indeterminacy. As W. Lawrence Hogue observes in his essay, "Postmodernism, Traditional Cultural Forms, and the African American Narrative," Reed supplies the reader with sufficient facts to make *Mumbo Jumbo*'s version of history plausible enough that it cannot be rejected outright, and yet, Hogue remarks,

[210] Gates writes: "The story of the present is narrated from the limited but multiple points of view of the characters who people its subplots and submysteries; the story of the past, however, is narrated in an omniscient voice, which reads the story of the present, in the manner of a literary critic's close reading of a primary text. *Mumbo Jumbo*'s double narrative, then, its narrative-within-a-narrative, is an allegory of the act of reading itself. Reed uses this second mode of ironic omniscient narration to Signify upon the nature of the novel in general but especially upon Afro-American naturalism and modernism." See Gates, *Signifying,* 229.

"he also makes the telling of the story so outrageous and fantastic . . . that the reader cannot trust the text completely" (182). *Mumbo Jumbo* provides substantial proof in the form of quotations, verifiable statistics, and factual information that might easily be checked against data already recorded in the "official" annals of history, however, as Hogue notes, "Reed mixes these verifiable historical figures and events with a kind of alternate mythical history that includes Moses, an Egyptian god and goddess, an ageless Knight Templar, and a mysterious ship from Haiti. This history is pure mythology" (182). Indeed, in *Mumbo Jumbo* history and myth are treated as equivalencies, both to be venerated and critiqued in equal terms and with the same attention paid to the role of imagination as an intrinsic component of interpretation (no matter how quotidian or fantastical that interpretation might be).

According to Mas'ud Zavarzadeh's analysis of contemporary metafictional forms in "The Apocalyptic Fact and the Eclipse of Fiction," this grey area between myth and history (as mentioned in the second chapter of this dissertation), is best described as "fictual," or, a syncretic melding of fictional and factual forms. As Zavarzadeh writes (quoted here at length):

> For the nonfiction novel, facts—objects of the senses—are the only available ultimate ontological reality. This is, by the Modernist criteria, a "reduced reality" which eliminates, as far as possible, the pattern-making mind of the artist and substitutes for private mythologies the myths outflowing from contemporary facts. This fiction of fact can be mapped out only in the intermediary zone of experience I have referred to as "fictual," an area which language with its entrenched factual-fictional polarization of experience cannot currently identify. The metaphysical void and the consequent moral vacuum which permeates contemporary experience cannot be willed away by enforced, imaginable solutions. In the absence of binding beliefs, the nonfiction novel replaces made-up mythological systems, and its writer assumes the position of the mythographer of the "global village" in which daily experience eludes simple meaningful/meaningless reality testing and, in Robbe-Grillet's words, is "neither significant nor absurd. It *is*, quite simply." Today's

> American narrative artist, in the forms of metafiction and the nonfiction novel, attempts to map this *is-ness* of the world — the myth of the obvious. (The Apocalyptic Fact and the Eclipse of Fiction" 82-83, Zavarzadeh's emphasis)

In Reed's metafiction, the "moral vacuum" that obtains in the removal of "enforced, imaginable solutions" only describes the space required for the development of a morality based upon new, *self*-enforced imaginative solutions. And in works such as *Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed makes an attempt to reinstate what Zavazadeh refers to as the "pattern-making mind of the artist" as the fundamental basis of his own writing process while also encouraging his reader's involvement with that process. Indeed, Reed requires the reader to construct a system of "private mythologies" as an integral part of the reading process without in any way substituting the primacy of the reader's imagination for the inherently limited selection of "contemporary facts" that surround and pervade his texts. Reed's metafiction requires the reader to make up his or her own mind as to what to believe and what to do with one's own experience and history.

Despite the obvious literary and political merits of Reed's metafictional approach, critics such as Addison Gayle, Jr. have found Reed's loose interpretations of historical events, cultural myths, and the solid facts of experience to represent more than just a disregard for the "ontological reality" of factual accounts and documentary descriptions; Gayle claims that Reed's writing displays a flagrantly damaging disregard for the integrity of black experience. In critical works such as "Black Women and Black Men: The Literature of Catharsis," Gayle deprecates Reed's ironic stance and his viciously parodic significations on his own literary tradition, labeling Reed a "victim of the myths of others" (49). Gayle draws a rhetorical line in the sand, and pronounces that he sees no place in the "black

aesthetic tradition" for writers, such as Reed, who do not manifest the utmost deference for the black tradition in their writing (51).[211] However, recalling both Hutcheon's definition of postmodern parody and Gates's assessment of the signifying structure of the black literary canon, it is clear that the stylistic, political, and historiographical lines drawn by critics such as Gayle are not only completely out of tune with the very tradition they purport to defend, Gayle's line of reasoning also betrays an incredible misreading of the inherent paradoxes of parodic fiction as a form of critical literary revision, as a medium of political protest and, not least importantly, as a means constructing a truly authentic identity in terms of one's self and one's historical moment.

Reed's high ironic metafiction illustrates that the perversely complicated problem of history continues to haunt every aspect of American cultural and social experience, permeating every act of literacy and orality, pervading all concepts of private and group identity, and lurking at the very center of any contemporary sense of responsibility, authority, and authenticity. And from this undead complex of past and present constructs Reed's fiction invokes the insane phantom of historical discourse (like the neo-HooDoo spectre that haunts Reed's "Black power poem"), dodging, disappearing, weaving text with text, artifact with artifice, and answering every riddle with a dual-voiced discourse of its own.

In novels such as *Pallbearers, Yellow Back Radio, and Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed's narrative demands of the reader: What culture's history? What society's

[211] Reed's response to Gayle in his prose poem, "Harlem Renaissance Day," is equally scathing: "Some sullen, humourless critics of the Black Aesthetic movement seem to have long since abandoned rational argument and take their lead from Addison Gayle, Jr., who at the conclusion of his careless new book, *The Way of the New World*, recommends the machine-gunning of those who disagree with him, surely a sign of intellectual insecurity." See Reed, *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans*, 297. And for further analysis of this conflict, see also Martin, *Ishmael Reed,* 50.

history? Who is to write this history? How is it to be written, or, should it even be written at all? What or whom does it represent? And from whence does the unequivocal authority, or, indeed, the unequivocal responsibility to excavate, compose, or revise history originate? Reed's parody underlines repeatedly the fact that each of these questions is a pressing question that leads to its own important, area-specific perspectives, prescriptions, and projections, but that no single perspective is ever sufficient in itself to capture the enormous complexity of the question of history. As Reed suggests at the end of *Mumbo Jumbo* (playing on metaphors taken from the introduction of Arna Bontemps's *Black Thunder* [1936]): "Time is a pendulum. Not a river. More akin to what goes around comes around" (218). Reed recognizes that circularities and cycles exist, but also imminent in Reed's use of this phrase is a signifying reminder that, what comes around is *always* around, present even in its absence, and like Ellison's boomerang (*Invisible Man* 6), it can get you if proper attention is not paid to its direction.

Reed's fiction proposes that one way of avoiding being knocked unconscious by the boomerang of history is to step outside of the realms of essentialist single-consciousness and/or dualist double-consciousness and embrace one's unique otherness and alterity. In novels such as *Pallbearers, Yellow Back Radio*, and *Mumbo Jumbo,* Reed not only describes, in surreal detail, the horrors of essentialist convention and the damages caused by single-minded conformity to dogma, these novels also specify that the only means of separating the truth of history, myth, and identity from enforced dogmatic cant is to maintain a position of otherness. This position, Reed's writing indicates, does not require a removal from history or a denial of myth, but simply the maintenance of a safe distance from the intellectual

and spiritual rigor mortis that sets in when beliefs are enforced and histories are closed to amendment.

In Reed's writing, as in the works of Coover and Barthelme, this distance is achieved primarily through the use of ironic narrative forms, humourous rhetorical tropes, and a style of performative, speakerly narration that constantly blurs the distinction between imagination and reality, history and myth. However, even beyond the level of formal similarity these three prominent postmodern writers also share a common awareness that, as bell hooks puts it in her essay, "Postmodern Blackness":

> Postmodern culture with its decentered subject can be the space where ties are severed or it can provide the occasion for new and varied forms of bonding. To some extent, ruptures, surfaces, contexuality . . . create gaps that make space for oppositional practices which no longer require intellectuals to be confined by narrow separate spheres with no meaningful connection to the world of the everyday. (631)

Indeed, the legacy of literary postmodernism and its metafictional excursions into the realm of abstraction is a renewed space for authentic communication and, as discussed in the concluding chapter of this dissertation, the possibility of new, more sincere forms of narrative irony. The writing of these three authors has participated in the movement towards these new forms of narrative irony by showing that the grand narratives of authority and officially sanctioned authenticity are only as strong as their enforcement. Take out the guards with leveling, satirical ridicule, storm the gates with magical metaphors and supernatural agency, and a personally authentic, politically-poetic narrative discourse is made possible—one that rejects the polarization of experience and recognizes the "fictual" nature of all constructs. This inherently paradoxical ironic sincerity is not, however, a retreat from the larger socio-cultural terrors of control that characterize the high irony of the 1960s and 70s,

but rather a widening of the discourse made possible during this period of American letters to also accommodate the personal terrors of control that affect experience on a daily basis. This return to the primacy of experience, and its resultant modal descent (i.e., a shift in modal dominance from the high ironic modal position to a mode of fiction closer in proximity to the threshold of experience) maintains its formal, intertextual ties with the metafictional techniques and parodic devices of the high ironic, but the explosive, quantum agency of the high ironic narrator and protagonist have been replaced by interlocutors more sensitive to the limitations of indirect ironic dialogue and the significance of compassion and communication.

The works of writers such as Coover and Barthelme suggest that such a shift might be possible, but it is in the works of Reed that the means of deploying the rhetorical arsenal of ironic forms in the service of compassionate communication is fully demonstrated. Standing beside the cage of history, Reed's writing reverses the polarities and finds the voracious monster locked on the outside and his own vision of things safely protected by the limitless parameters of a boundless imagination.

CONCLUSION

POST-POSTMODERNISM AND THE LEGACY OF THE HIGH IRONIC

> So we have a difficulty. What shall we call the New Thing, which I haven't encountered yet but which is bound to be out there somewhere? Post-Post-Modernism sounds, to me, a little lumpy. I've been toying with the Revolution of the Word II, or the New Revolution of the Word, but I'm afraid the Jolas estate may hold a copyright. It should have the word "new" in it somewhere. The New Newness? Or maybe the Post-New? It's a problem. I await your comments and suggestions. If we're going to slap a saddle on this rough beast, we've got to get moving.
>
> --- Donald Barthelme, "Letter to a literary critic," 1975

Locating the Post-Postmodern

"Dear Gaston," the narrator begins in Barthelme's mock-letter to a fictitious literary critic, "Yes, you are absolutely right—Postmodernism is dead" (*Not-Knowing* 45).[212] The letter continues:

> A stunning blow, but not entirely unanticipated. I am spreading the news as rapidly as possible, so that all of our friends who are in the Post-Modernist "bag" can get out of it before their cars are repossessed and the insurance companies tear up their policies. Sad to see Post-Modernism go (and so quickly!). I was fond of it. As fond, almost, as I was of its grave and noble predecessor, Modernism. But we cannot dwell in the done-for. The death of a movement is a natural part of life, as was understood so well by the partisans of Naturalism, which is dead. (*Not-Knowing* 45)

And in the thirty odd years since the writing of Barthelme's satirical letter, he and his narrator have not been alone in this pronouncement. With tedious regularity, the death of postmodernism has been echoing through the halls of academia, strewn

[212] Barthelme's "Letter to a literary critic" has seen a number of incarnations. Beginning with an appearance in the "Notes and Comment" section of the August 11, 1975 issue of *The New Yorker*, this text also appeared as a letter from Gaston to Alphonse in the story "Not-Knowing" as well as being incorporated into a variety of conference papers and other textual deployments. The version quoted here comes from the text selected by Kim Herzinger for inclusion in the "Here in the Village" section of *Not-Knowing*. See Barthelme, *Not-Knowing*, 44-45, 322-24.

across the pages of countless critical journals, and publicly mourned at literature and cultural studies conferences for decades. But somehow the death of postmodernism (fittingly) seems to have maneuvered its own obituary into some kind of endless *mise-en-abîme* feedback loop of sudden passings (usually linked to some historical event of global significance; e.g., November 9, 1989, Fukuyama's "End of History," Y2K, 9/11, etc.)[213] and Lazarus-like miracle reappearances. And yet in spite of the absolute, unambiguous, immaculately documented certainty of these recurring reports of postmodernism's demise, as Charles B. Harris writes in a recent piece for the *American Book Review*, "the corpse remains suspiciously lively. Like Barthelme's Dead Father, it continues to walk among us, not only prompting frequent sightings (a new novel by Barth here, one by Federman there) but producing offspring . . . ." ("PoMo's Wake, I"). And reminiscent of the list of ungainly neologisms suggested by Barthelme's narrator, these "offspring" of the undead and undying fathers of postmodernism have had to put up with (or have coined for themselves) all manner of new denominative propositions for the supposedly "New Thing" imagined as the successor to first-wave postmodernism: "Image-Fiction," "Blank Fiction," "Tragic Realism," "Psychological Realism," "Speculative Realism," "Crackpot Realism," "Avant-Pop," "New-New-Post," "PoPoMo," "Long Modernism," "New Sincerity," and even "the novel of intimacy."[214] However, the

[213] See McHale and Stevenson, *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century Literatures in English,* 274; Tabbi, "American World Fiction in the Longue Durée," 84-85; McLaughlin, "Post-postmodern Discontent," 107; Milletti, "Innovative Fiction and the Poetics of Power: Gertrude Stein and Christine Brooke-Rose 'Do' Language,"18; Murphy, "To Have Done with Postmodernism: A Plea (or Provocation) for Globalization Studies," 31; Burn, *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism,* 9-15; Grausam, "'It is only a statement of the power of what comes after': Atomic Nostalgia and the Ends of Postmodernism," 310-311.

[214] Arranged in order of appearance: see Wallace "E Unibus Pluram" 171; Annesley, *Blank Fictions: Consumerism, Culture, and the Contemporary American Novel,* 135-36; Franzen, "Perchance to Dream," 53; Bukiet, "Crackpot Realism: Fiction for the Forthcoming Millenium," 13; Saldívar,

category most generally attached to this contemporary generation of metafictions (notwithstanding its lumpiness) appears to be "post-postmodernism."[215] But what does this second prefix entail? And where is the *post-* in post-postmodernism actually pointing?

While each of the above categories (as well as the texts and tendencies each describes, some more playfully than others) varies significantly in the emphasis it places on matters of textual form, cultural and/or historical moment, and phenomenological referentiality (among other literary problematics carried over from the postmodern), throughout the contemporary criticism of post-postmodernism runs a recurring theme of "post-ironic sincerity."[216] This post-ironic sincerity, as variously articulated by critics and writers such as Samuel R. Delany, Lynne Tillman, Jonathan Franzen, David Foster Wallace, and Robert L. McLaughlin (among a host of others), describes a critical re-assessment of the ironic nature of the postmodern text and a movement toward a new set of aesthetic positions and political responsibilities no longer directly guided by ironic narrative forms and parodic constructs.[217]

The final section of this dissertation is an attempt to trace the development of this post-postmodern literature of post-ironic sincerity and briefly examine its formal and political relationships to the type of high ironic metafictional parody practiced by

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"Historical Fantasy, Speculative Realism, and Postrace Aesthetics in Contemporary American Fiction," 575; McGurl, "The Program Era: Pluralisms of Postwar American Fiction," 102-05; Amerika and Olsen, *In Memoriam to Postmodernism: Essays on Avant-Pop,* 2; Federman "Critifictional Reflections" 228; Harris "PoMo's Wake, I"; Hungerford, "On the Period Formerly Known as Contemporary," 418; Burn, *Jonathan Franzen,* ix-xi; Delany, "Fiction's Present: Brief Notes," 12-13.

[215] See Burn, *Jonathan Franzen,* 17; McLaughlin, "Post-postmodern Discontent," 108, 115-16; Harris, "PoMo's Wake, I."

[216] The phrase "post-ironic sincerity" is borrowed from Monika Gehlawat's 2008, UC Berkeley doctoral thesis, *Boom: The New York City Flâneur in Postwar American Literature and Art*. See Gehlawat, *Boom,* 1-4.

[217] See Delany, "Fiction's Present," 12-13; Tillman, "Critical Fiction/Critical Self," 21; Franzen, *How to Be Alone,* 68-70; Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," 180-84; Burn, *Jonathan Franzen,* 21; and Robert L. McLaughlin, "Post-postmodern Discontent," 115-16.

postmodern writers such as Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, and Ishmael Reed. It is proposed that the critical, self-reflexive, metafictional narrative forms explored and popularized by Coover, Barthelme, and Reed during the period of high ironic modal dominance have led to an increasing tendency toward a more direct, unaffected mode of narrative. This post-postmodern mode of post-ironic sincerity not only signals a change in the cultural values and political crises of late twentieth and early twenty-first century America, this change also indicates that the high ironic mode, with its matrix of playful linguistic acrobatics, parodic subversions of orthodox ontology and epistemology, and its radical ironic indeterminacy, is no longer adequate to the task of confronting the problems faced in today's post-postmodern world.

The End of Irony?

Despite the reactionary opinions of media pundits and journalists such as *Vanity Fair*'s Graydon Carter, who on September 18, 2001, famously announced that, "There's going to be a seismic change. I think it's the end of the age of irony. . . Things that were considered fringe and frivolous are going to disappear" (Qtd. in Beers), the "seismic change" declared by Carter had actually been rumbling through American literature since the late 1970s. Even in the mid-career works of the first-wave fathers of postmodern American literature a shift in narrative form and political focus is readily apparent. In claustrophobic works such as Coover's *Gerald's Party* (1985) and Barthelme's *Paradise* (1986) and *Sam's Bar: An American Landscape* (1987) it is clear that a new sense of isolation and contradiction had entered the postmodern metafictional mix by the 1980s. And comparison of Reed's *The Terrible*

Twos (1982) to his *The Terrible Threes* (1989) provides a similar trajectory away from the maddening rush of complex, signifying rhetoric that characterizes his early poetry and fiction towards an increasingly personal mode of revisionary historicism. In each of these works the prose is directed gradually further away from the grand histories and myths of the past, towards a more personal, domestic, if somewhat uncomfortably tense, approach to the grand histories and myths of the present.

As explored in the previous chapters of this dissertation, this continual modal shift toward new narrative explorations of the experiential moment, toward innovative approaches to the depiction of personal and group identities, and toward the formulation of new narrative means by which to conceive and question issues of personal responsibility and agency, was brought to the forefront of American literature by the radical, high ironic poetics of the 1960s and early 70s. Through the parodic metafictional critiques of these early postmodern writers the hypocrisies of history and myth that exist throughout American culture and society were exposed through humour, deconstructive fragmentation, signifyin(g) wordplay, and an incendiary irony that sought to identify the aporias in all ontological and epistemological constructs through a self-reflexively critical approach to the language of narrative. As argued in this dissertation's analyses of the works of Coover, Barthelme, and Reed, by looking at the inner workings of Western myth and American history through the ironic bullet-holes shot in them by the writers, artists, and other subversives of the early postmodern period, many of the dangerous ideologies hidden behind the falsely authoritative, hypocritical, and self-privileging constructs of Western society and culture are revealed and opened up for questioning. These revelations and questionings were made possible by means of a

violently critical, high ironic mode of metafictional parody.

As David Foster Wallace writes in his oft-cited essay, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction": ". . . irony—exploiting gaps between what's said and what's meant, between how things try to appear and how they really are—is the time-honored way artists seek to illuminate and explode hypocrisy" (182). That the first-wave postmodern writers and artists turned their ironic weaponry upon the "lone-gunman Westerns, paternalistic sitcoms, and jut-jawed law enforcement circa 1960," Wallace argues, was due to the fact that these artificial idols and images of authority represented, celebrated, and perpetuated, "a deeply hypocritical American self-image" (182). Through ironic narrative forms, postmodern writers such as Ken Kesey, Thomas Pynchon, William S. Burroughs, William Gaddis, Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, and Ishmael Reed attacked the metaphors and myths of this false American image. As Wallace describes in his itemized list of exploded hypocrisies:

> Kesey's dark parody of asylums suggested that our arbiters of sanity were maybe crazier than their patients [e.g., *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, 1975]; Pynchon reoriented our view of paranoia from deviant psychic fringe to central thread in the corporo-bureaucratic weave [e.g., *The Crying of Lot 49*, 1966]; DeLillo exposed image, signal, data, and tech as agents of spiritual chaos and not social order [e.g. *Americana*, 1971]. Burroughs's icky explorations of American narcosis exploded hypocrisy [e.g., *The Nova Trilogy*, 1961-67]; Gaddis's exposure of abstract capital as dehumanizing exploded hypocrisy [e.g., *JR*, 1975]; Coover's repulsive political farces exploded hypocrisy [e.g., *The Public Burning*, 1977]. (183)

And to this list might easily be added Barthelme's humourous manipulations of clichéd American icons and Western cultural trash in *Snow White* and *The Dead Father* as well as Ishmael Reed's militant neo-HooDoo mayhem and violent mythical deconstructions in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* and *Mumbo Jumbo*—all works aimed at exploding hypocrisy through ironic narrative parody.

In “E Unibus Pluram,” Wallace argues that, “Irony in sixties art and culture started out the same way youthful rebellion did. It was difficult and painful, and *productive*—a firm diagnosis of a long-denied disease” (183 Wallace’s emphasis). “The assumptions behind this early postmodern irony,” writes Wallace, were frank, idealistic, and very convincingly maintained “that etiology and diagnosis pointed toward cure; that revelation of imprisonment yielded freedom” (183). However, despite the intense idealism behind the political aesthetics of first-wave postmodernism, much of the tension and self-awareness present in the literature of the 1980s is directly informed by the anxiety surrounding the disappointing realization that, while these 1960s and 70s “revelations” did manage to yield significant advancements in the actualization of the freedoms necessary for un-repressed artistic expression (within the Cold War-era Western world at least), these explosive attacks on American hypocrisy did not yield much freedom beyond the insulated bounds of the privileged sectors of American society, (white) academia, and the elite culture of the American art world.

Rather than a new world order of free expression and unbridled creativity, with the deconstructive undermining of the grand narratives of pure ontological myth and pure epistemological history came the location of the economic and inter-personal mechanisms of power and control that continue to exert their influences on the course of world events. In response to the location of these new threats, the character of narrative irony also changed. Flights of high ironic fancy are replaced by a growing disaffection for the bounds of the prison-house of language that the early postmodern artists and theorists had identified and explored. In the 1980s, parody and self-reflexivity turns increasingly inward, and is often directed narcissistically

and self-destructively against the frustrating, insular limitations of the supposedly autonomous object of the text and its linguistically mediated ontology.

In works such as Lynne Tillman's *Living with Contradictions* (1982), Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (1982), Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), and Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984), metafictional tactics of parody and narrative collage are brought to bear against the object of the text, the object of the self, and the place of these objects within an American culture of production and consumption. And in Acker's 1983 novella, *My Death, My Life, by Pier Paolo Pasolini*, these forms of objectification are investigated by the text's multiple narrators and ever-shifting angles of narrative approach. As one of the novella's mercurial narrators states:

> I'm an object. Do you, reader, know anything about human objects, what caused them: you with your clawings, your gripes, your grippes, your petty boyfriend complaints? This, all this, is object. Scream. I dream of being punished. Scream. I dream of torment that will carry me over the edge and make me act without considering the action. I dream of having a body and it and thinking being one monster. (*My Death, My Life* 281-82)

This terrible realization that all is only language creates a similar anxiety in Acker's *Don Quixote* (1986). Finding herself the object of a medical procedure, at once surrounded by unfamiliar objects, and also experiencing the insertion of unknown objects into her body to remove still other foreign objects, Acker's protagonist tangentially exclaims, "Why can't I just love?" to which the protagonist's own internal narrator replies:

> 'Because every verb to be realized needs its object. Otherwise, having nothing to see, it can't see itself or be. Since love is sympathy or communication, I need an object which is both subject and object: to love, I must love a soul. Can a soul exist without a body? Is physical separate from mental? Just as love's object is the appearance of love; so the physical realm is the appearance of the godly: the mind is the

> body. This,' she thought, 'is why I've got a body. This is why I'm having an abortion. So I can love.' (*Don Quixote* 10)

Similar riddles of mind and body, love and desire, self and other surround the stories in Lynne Tillman's *Living with Contradictions*, especially in the collection's eponymous title story. Musing self-reflexively to herself on the contradictory nature of her inherently limited, verbally constructed, commercially mediated experience, Tillman's narrator wonders, "What would it be like not to have a contemporary mind? Intimacy is something people used to talk about before commercials. Now there's nothing to say" ("Living with Contradictions" 121). She continues:

> People are intimate with their analysts, if they're lucky. What could be more intimate than an advertisement for Ivory soap? It's impossible not to be affected.
> . . .
> The manufacture of desire and the evidence of real desire. But 'real' desire is for what—for what is real or manufactured? (121)

In marked decline is the flippant, satirical humour of Coover, Barthelme, and Reed—the ribald nonchalance of high ironic absurdity and grotesque enigma gradually replaced by a growing sense of insecurity and the knottiness of personal paradox and mundane contradiction. Indeed, in throwing back the curtain of semiotic referentiality to reveal the verbal nature of all interpretations and articulations of experience, many of the characters and narrators of 1980s metafiction, like the narrators in Acker's *Don Quixote* and Tillman's "Living with Contradictions," discover, as a result, that they share only as much stake in reality as an Ivory soap advertisement or a string of subject-verb agreements.

As is apparent in the examples above, the sense of crippling insignificance that developed in the texts of this period also reflected an angst that many artists and writers of the period were feeling in regards to their tentative place within an

American culture increasingly crowded with the false art of marketing propaganda, big-budget fluff, and commercial everything. In other works of the period, such as DeLillo's *White Noise* (1984), Ellis's *Less Than Zero* (1985), Tim O'Brien's *The Nuclear Age* (1985), and Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things* (1987), the objectification of experience, of identity and all aspects of individual expression is portrayed as the source of a distinct absence of authenticity. This absence is interrogated in these novels through an ironic assessment of the disparate and often directly contradictory things that Americans buy—both materially and consciously—to confirm their success, assert their independence, and affirm their identity. In grueling and frequently gruesome detail, these works catalogue and quantify the loss of self that attends the expansion of popular (commercial) culture into the lives of an American mass-market populace of greedy, paranoid, image-obsessed consumers.

The "image-fiction" that developed as a reply to this mass-market America, according to Wallace's analysis in "E Unibus Pluram," followed the terms of a pop-centered narrative irony straight into the mirror that it held up to itself. In definition, Wallace writes:

> Image-fiction is basically a further involution of the relations between lit and pop that blossomed with sixties postmodernists. If the postmodern church fathers found pop images valid *referents* and *symbols* in fiction, and if in the seventies and early eighties this appeal to the features of mass culture shifted from *use* to *mention*, certain avant-gardists starting to treat of pop and TV and watching as themselves fertile *subjects*, the new fiction of image uses the transient received myths of popular culture as a *world* in which to imagine fictions about 'real,' albeit pop-mediated, public characters. (171, Wallace's emphasis)

The advantage of the image-fiction approach to the problems of immaterial authenticity, "real" reality, and the late twentieth century proliferation of dissimulative rhetoric and "fictual" simulacra, Wallace claims, is a "re-imagining

[of] what human life might truly be like over there across the chasms of illusion, mediation, demographics, marketing, image, and appearance" (172-73). However, Wallace states with obvious disappointment, in becoming one with the "passive, addictive TV-psychology" of consumer America, image-fiction does not move beyond the self-stifling constraints of its own irony-saturated discourse (173). Wrapped in the numbing, and ultimately self-silencing entropy of extreme ironic self-consciousness, the soul-crushing corporate world projected by the image-fictions of writers such as DeLillo, Ellis, O'Brien, and Auster in the 1980s, as well as those of Douglas Coupland (*Generation X* [1991]), Mark Leyner (*My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist* [1990] and *Tooth Imprints on a Corndog* [1996]) and Ricardo Cortez Cruz (*Premature Autopsies* [1997]) in the 1990s, according to Wallace's assessment, act more to support the expansion of the corporate ogre of neoliberal Capitalism than they do to secure the further advancement and/or the innovation of new forms of individual expression and the creative renovation of American culture (182-83).

For just below the surface of the simulacrum (in novels such as those in Auster's *New York Trilogy* [1985-87]), beneath the labels and items of consumer capital that arrive already bearing the name of some designer or some producer (as in Ellis's *Less Than Zero*, *American Psycho* [1991], and *Glamorama* [1998]), and within the myth of some resonant substantiality that a given product is said to contain, represent, or satisfy (such as the Dylar in DeLillo's *White Noise* or the baseball in his *Underworld* [1997]), is nothing but desire and solipsism. As Jedediah Purdy interprets it in his analysis of post-postmodern irony in *For Common Things*, through the profound emptiness and paranoia explored in works such as these, "we

[as reader] sense an unreal quality in our words and even in our thoughts. They are superficial, they belong to other people and other purposes; they are not ours, and it may be that nothing is properly ours" (Qtd. in O'Brien "On Death and Donuts" 157).[218] But how did the tables turn so completely on the idealistic radicalism and cathartic black humour that evolved during the period of high ironic modal dominance?

According to both Wallace and Franzen, the profound emptiness in much of the literature of the 1980s is due in part to the contemporary appropriation of ironic forms and parodically self-reflexive constructs by popular media such as television and other market-driven vehicles of commercial advertising ("E Unibus Pluram" 183; "Perchance to Dream" 40-42). By evacuating ironic forms and parodic narrative constructs of their social purpose and refashioning them into flashy, multi-voiced, self-reflexive tools of consumer appeal, irony becomes a highly effective weapon in the commercial battle to subvert consumer suspicion, create desire, and, through dissimulation and double-speak, to divert consumer attention from the insidious solicitations of its own sales-pitch. Writers and critics such as Wallace, McLaughlin, and Christy Wampole make a very plausible case for this development, for the humourous, signifyin(g) forms of ironic dissimulation and the self-denigrating (and, therefore, self-acquitting) reflexivity of ironic meta-*fictuality* do make the high ironic mode of narrative an ideal mode for the creation of entertaining, persuasive pieces of advertising.[219] However, as this shift occurs and pop-critical irony begins to overlap with and become indistinct from simple pop-irony, the socio-critical purpose is

[218] See Purdy, *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today*, xiii.
[219] See Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," 181-84; McLaughlin, "Post-Postmodern Discontent," 112-14; Wampole, "How to Live Without Irony."

replaced by a financial purpose and the ironic mode is, thereby, drained of its supposedly meliorative edge.

That this is so, Wallace argues (with more than a trace of Kierkegaard in his analysis), is due to the fact that, "irony, entertaining as it is, serves an exclusively negative function. It's critical and destructive, a ground-clearing. Surely this is the way our postmodern fathers saw it. But irony's singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks" (183). To Wallace this negativity amounts to a kind of tyranny of emptiness and vacuity based on a rhetoric of, "I don't really mean what I say" (183-84), and to Wallace and other contemporary American artists and writers such as Jonathan Franzen, Dave Eggers, Jonathan Safran Foer, and Jeffrey Eugenides, such a position runs counter to any form of creative expression that consciously—and conscientiously—conceives of itself as other than a marketing tool or simply another unit to be shifted from producer to consumer.

Ironizing Irony, or, Sincerity in the Post-Postmodern Moment

As McLaughlin writes in "Post-Postmodern Discontent," because the hyper-visual, sales-driven culture of American media has, in the opinion of these authors, "co-opted postmodernism's bag of tricks to deleterious effect, writers of fiction, especially those who see themselves as the heirs of postmodernism, need to find a way beyond self-referential irony to offer the possibility of construction" (114).[220] In answer to this possibility, post-postmodern fictions seek to show by means of contrast, McLaughlin writes, that "self-referentiality by itself collaborates with the

[220] A similar call for the reversal of cynicism and a return to traditional values is also present throughout Franzen's "Perchance to Dream." See Franzen, "Perchance to Dream, 35–54.

culture of consumer technology to create a society of style without substance, of language without meaning, of cynicism without belief, of virtual communities without human connection, of rebellion without change" (115). While this literary exhaustion (not unlike the exhaustion described by Barth at the very beginning of the postmodern period)[221] was certainly not the intended socio-cultural consequence behind the writing of such self-reflexive texts as Coover's *Pricksongs & Descants*, Barthelme's *Snow White*, and Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo,* nevertheless, such is the character of the endlessly changing, instantly dynamic chimera of "consumer technology" that the subversive nature of irony must, itself, be subverted in order for literature to remain subversive.

Wallace's suggestion in "E Unibus Pluram," a suggestion echoed throughout texts such as his *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999), *Consider the Lobster* (2005), *This is Water* (2009), and woven into the dialogical rhetoric and metafictional fragments of his posthumously published *The Pale King* (2011), is that the next step forward, towards genuine substance and the negation of negative ironic negation, is precisely that—the construction of a counter irony, or, reverse "anti-irony" through an embracing of sincere forms of expression and "single-entendre values." Wallace writes:

> The next real literary 'rebels' in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of 'anti-rebels' . . . who have the childish gall actually to endorse single-entendre values. Who treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naïve, anachronistic. Maybe that'll be the point, why they'll be the next real rebels. ("E

[221] McLaughlin draws a similar parallel in his discussion of Boswell, Barth, and Eco. See McLaughlin, "Post-Postmodern Discontent," 104-07.

Unibus Pluram" 192-93) [222]

Although it is, perhaps, too early to say what influence these proposed "anti-rebels" will have on the course of future literary developments, nevertheless, formally conservative, highly "sincere" novels such as Dave Eggers's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000), Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* (2002), and Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex* (2002), have already made their collective mark on the American literary landscape. And between the four of them, these novels have also won almost every prestigious literary award on offer, sharing between them: a *Time* magazine "Book of the Year" award, a National Book Award, a James Tait Black Award for Fiction, a National Jewish Book Award, a Guardian First Book Award, and a Pulitzer Prize for Fiction (among a lengthy list of other prizes, short-listings, and literary honors).[223]

Pushing the dominant literary mode away from the abstract realm of metafictional high irony and ever closer to the realm of subjective identification (as outlined in the first chapter of this dissertation), these works have been lauded for their genial humour, their mastery of observed detail, their earnest concern for human relationships, and their heartfelt attempts to articulate the paradoxes of daily

[222] Wallace locates this kind of questionably ironic anti-rebellion in works such as Zbigniew Herbert's *Mr. Cogito* (1994), as he writes in his review of the work for *Spin* magazine: "Since any great poem communicates an emotional urgency that postmodernism's integument of irony renders facile or banal, postmodern poets have a tough row to hoe. Herbert's Cogito-persona permits ironic absurdism and earnest emotion not only to coexist but to nourish one another. . . . It seems significant that only writers from Eastern Europe and Latin America have succeeded in marrying the stuff of spirit and human feeling to the parodic detachment the postmodern experience seems to require. Maybe as political conditions get more oppressive here, we Americans'll get good at it, too." See Wallace, *Both Flesh and Not,* 121-22.

[223] See Erin Skarda, "*A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*"; National Book Foundation, "National Book Awards, 2001"; Harper Collins Publishers, "Jonathan Safran Foer"; The Pulitzer Prizes, "The 2003 Pulitzer Prize Winners: Fiction"; "Contributors: Jonathan Franzen."

experience.[224] Convivial, full of quirky, carefully developed characters, and rife with uncomfortably awkward "real life" situations and relationships, these novels do not, however, represent the sort of rebellion one might expect as sufficiently radical to shake up the literary world and move it in a new direction. And yet, all evidence suggests that such a move is definitely in the process of taking place. Whether this move simply represents a market fluctuation, or is actually indicative of a deeper transition is unclear, but one thing is certain, the difference in mode between the high ironic metafiction of the postmodern period and its post-postmodern successor is noticeable and significant.

With this return to character, emotion, and personal intimacy comes a drastic alteration to the polymorphic narrations and rhetorical contortions explored in the texts of Coover and Reed. Likewise, the collage-narrative flatness of Barthelme's intertextual curiosity shop of etchings, lists, and one-liners is critically revised in these post-postmodern texts and expanded into increasingly referential textual territory. Instead of heaping the rubbish of the world onto the reader—in the manner of Reed's machine-gun signifyin(g) and Barthelme's philosophical dreck—post-postmodern writers (at least, those writers mentioned above) are far more likely to pick through the rubbish of contemporary experience and describe it to the reader in detail, itemizing every ingredient, enumerating its provenance, and proposing its potential function within a global matrix of socio-cultural relations.

As explored by Wallace in "Octet" (in many ways a signifyin[g] post-postmodern revision of the "questionnaire" form as it figures into the structure of Barthelme's *Snow White* and the self-reflexive Q&A format in "Kierkegaard Unfair

[224] See Adam Begley "Come to the Cabaret"; Andrew O'Hehir "'The Corrections' by Jonathan Franzen"; Francine Prose "Back in the Totally Awesome U.S.S.R."; Mark Lawson "Gender Blender."

to Schelgel"),[225] language, even at its most abstract, self-reflexive extreme, is always inadequate to the task of formulating (let alone answering in any meaningful way) the inconceivable intricacy of experience. In this metafiction Wallace presents a number of generic scenarios, one of which involves the friendship and eventual falling-out of a certain X and Y. Rife throughout this hypothetical dilemma is the presence of real human drama, for the ethical questions and moral quandaries faced by the nameless entities in "Octet" describe the type of quotidian choices and interpretations "real" people make on an everyday basis. But what becomes increasingly clear as the abstract language ventures ever closer to the concrete, is the frustrating impossibility of ever meaningfully discerning the various intentions, desires, and psychological mechanisms and personal quirks involved in interactions between individuals (let alone the absurdity of attempting to articulate the true nature of these interactions in words). As the ostensible narrator states at the end of one of the quizzes, "In fact, the whole *mise en scène* here seems too shot through with ambiguity to make a very good Pop Quiz, it turns out" (113). And yet, throughout the works of Wallace as well as in the works of several of his contemporary post-postmodernists, is the sense that although language will always be incapable of the dispelling problem of experience, it is only through language that the problem of experience can become, at the very least, a shared problem.

The current post-postmodern modal shift back towards the threshold of experience marks a departure from the realm of narrative abstraction and a distinct movement towards a more realistic mode of shared, multiply-negotiated, interpersonal discourse, but is this emerging "post-ironic" mode actually any less

[225] See Barthelme, *Snow White,* 88-89; and *Sixty Stories*, 154-162.

ironic in its sincere approach? Might not the *post-* in post-ironic, like the *post-* in postmodern, be better thought of as a relational demarcation? Could not the post-ironic actually indicate a further advance in the evolution of irony as a mode of literature and discourse?

Obviously, it is far too early to propose an articulate reply to these post-postmodern questions. But if there is one, clearly discernible thing that connects each of the authors considered in this dissertation—whether modern, postmodern, or post-postmodern—it is their enduring appeal to the continued exploration of language. As Ihab Hassan writes in *The Dismemberment of Orpheus,* gesturing towards (and becoming) both the end and the beginning of the discourse engaged in this dissertation, "Language, after all, still remains the deepest habit of our mind, our most thorough inheritance from dead or vanished gods" (17). And like any inheritance, it is now up to its inheritors to decide the future of its use. For the question of language will always remain: which habits of use to discard and which habits of use are in need of further revision.

List of Illustrations

14) Donald Barthelme, illustration from “The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace,” in *Sadness,* 131.

15) Donald Barthelme, illustration from “The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace,” in *Sadness,* 139.

16) Donald Barthelme, illustration from “Brain Damage,” in *City Life,* 135.

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